Sacrificial Forms:
The Libretti in English 1940 - 2000

Alex Chih-Yuan Mai

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Department of English Literature

University of Glasgow

Synopsis

This thesis focuses on the genre of libretto, the sung words for music theatre. The "little book" which accompanies every operatic performance is not just an extended program note to the spectacle, but in fact a substantial literary form in its own right. However, despite the immense influence of Wagner, the output from librettists in an operatic collaboration, has been serious ignored; indeed in opera the aesthetic function of language is frequently diminished and foreshortened, because it is often re-directed by and within the music. The result is that librettists are often seen as offering words to be "decomposed" by composers in the process of operatic collaboration.

Opera, in the English language, finally achieved its rightful status, alongside its European counterparts, during the second half of the twentieth century. The thesis is intended to encompass something of the vast diversity of this genre and discusses a number of individual works as constituting legitimate literary artefacts in their own right. There will be five chapters featured in the thesis and each chapter is devoting to a specific theme.

The first chapter concentrates on the systems, codes and traditions which are required in the genre of music theatre paying special attention to the deployment of mythic themes and structures in their realisation. The Dionysian nature of music theatre suggests that there are powerful contending forces within the genre and that there is a corresponding necessity for the deployment of novel musical, linguistic and expressive means to maintain an effective balance in engaging the audience's attention.

In chapters two and three, the thesis will discuss the sacrificial function of both male and female protagonists in music theatre. Both heroes and heroines have a complex relation of representation and engagement with the audience's fantasy, and ultimately, transport their paying spectators into an emotional height, *jouissance*. However, while heroes are featured to be idealistic and fearless, heroines are portrayed as social victims, whose entire *raison d'etre* is to please not only their chauvinistic counterparts but also to satisfy their audience.

Libretti can also convey political messages like all other literary genres. The two operas which are presented in chapter four, fully demonstrate their potential. Alice Goodman and John Adams' two collaborations, have successfully encapsulated the major political agendas in the second half of the twentieth century. The audience can be submerged in political debates through an operatic performance no matter whether it is a confrontation between two superpowers or an everlasting regional feud.

Marriage and sacrifice are the binding force of a union between two individuals. Music theatre can also be interpreted as a product of a union between words and music. The four works in the final chapter represent different aspects and stages of marital union. Like marriage, artistic collaboration is not always smooth. There will be factors, some personal, some external, which may cause friction and even a threat of divorce. Libretto encapsulates a double sacrifice in music theatre, a religious offering of the protagonist and an artistic offering of the words. To read such unique literary works, is to recognise the librettists' contributions to an extraordinary art form, which has been bringing its audience excitement and knowledge for at least three hundred years.

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INTRODUCTION

SPHINX 1 & 2
You enslave whip beat and oppress.
You are so alone and pathetic.
Love from you means enslavement.[1]

In Mark-Anthony Turnage's two act opera, *Greek* (1989), an adaptation of Steven Berkoff's play of the same title, the composer invites readers to associate the piece with an ancient legacy. The work revisits the Oedipus myth and transposes it into the East End of London in Britain in the 1980s. The surreal confrontation between Eddy, the protagonist, and the two man-eating Sphinxes highlights the hero's destiny. After successfully solving the monsters' riddle prior to destroying them, the victorious hero finally realises that the woman to whom he has been married for ten years is, in fact, his biological mother. There follows the gruesome mime scene in which the protagonist seems to tear out his eyes and subsequently appears to die. This leads to a mock funeral procession in which the playwright attempts to set the piece in a tragic fashion in the manner of his predecessor.[2] However, in simply transplanting the Greek myth into a twentieth-century background, Berkoff fails to recreate any vital analogue of the mythic structure and its related social functions. Furthermore, the narrative style in *Greek* is inconsequential, in the sense that the various parts do not actually connect. *Greek* is in fact fundamentally a reflection on the playwright's own experience and consequently has only a tangential connection with the mythic source.

This rather severe judgement clearly rests on a number of foundational concepts and presuppositions that will have to be examined in some detail and indeed the latter parts of this Introduction as well as parts of Chapter One will be devoted to this matter. For now it can be said that one important function of a mythic narrative is to explain the formation and efficacy of certain social features. The legitimacy of

[1] See Mark-Anthony Turnage and Jonathan Moore, *Greek* Act II scene iii, the booklet accompanies the opera recording, Argo 44-368-2, p. 34.
[2] See Stephen Pettitt, "Mark-Anthony Turnage and 'Greek'", *Musical Times*, cxxix (1988), p. 397.

kingship, for example, is frequently constituted in terms of a sacralised role for the ruling family or class in which the authenticating principle is constructed in the terms of mythic narrative which presents itself as a quasi-explanation of the mystery of origin and election. As the ruler, a king should also act as the representative of his nation both with regard to his society and towards the gods and is consequently required to bear the symbolic burden of its social upheaval and crisis. It is in this context that in order to resolve its social problems, the monarch will have to perform and offer various types of sacrifice to placate the gods or forces of nature. In *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist's ultimate self-sacrifice is not due to the fact that he is a man who has committed a crime but because he is the king of Thebes who happens to have killed his father and married his mother. In these crimes against nature Oedipus has lost the right to rule the city state and his subjects have to suffer the consequences. In any attempt at constructing a modern version of such a myth, some plausible analogue of the original narrative motivation must be found if the functional or explanatory elements are not to be lost. Mythic narratives are not simple material objects that can be just moved about from one room to another. They are deeply embedded in a rich social context and if simply removed without compensating adjustments being made they die.

This point needs to be widened: as we shall see, the myth of the founding of Thebes is also a central theme in Hans Werner Henze, W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman's *The Bassarids* (1966). This opera provides a different example of a modernist interpretation of the ancient mythic narrative. Unlike the narratively incoherent and thematically confused *Greek*, *The Bassarids* not only stylistically updates the ancient myth through the eyes of modern psychoneurosis but also retains its original's mythic origin via its symbolic and allegorical functions and their obvious connections to recent European history. In its moral and theological perspectives it thus harks back to a Greek theatre which seems to have had its origins in staged religious choral events, and whose connection with religion and the *Dionysa* persisted for some considerable time. As well as the plays themselves being quasi-religious events, the mythological stories that form so important a part of the canon also have some grounding in civic religion. Further, although neither the Greeks nor the Romans ever had sacred books in the sense that the Bible or the Vedic hymns are sacred, mythic narratives were accepted as authoritative in their own right and in consequence would have been seen as telling some kind of truth, even if that truth is

uncertain or obscure. One important reason for the early Church being against the theatre was its association with a rival set of theologies and the Church wanted to claim an exclusive access to theological truth and authority. The classical plays derive their authority partly from their retelling of traditional legends, but more especially from their ritual or cultic position. And because they did not derive their authority from fixed inspired texts, they were able to display considerable variety as circumstances required. But if the stories were to have continued life through the changes of history and society, they had either to undergo some change of function and corresponding relocation in ritual and performance terms or be violently allegorised. As a result, the narratives of mythic drama, beside their possible claims to truth-telling, were already to a considerable extent fictive.

Consequently, it does not seem necessary to regard the Greeks as believing in the literal truth of these narratives. Because, as with almost all myths, the actual ontological commitments in myths are vague, the details of the stories may even be absurd without their status being undermined. Perhaps they should be thought of mainly as being "as if" narratives. Take the myth of the discovery of fire: the results of this discovery are so momentous it is as if Prometheus brought it directly down from the gods. Myths thus function as if true descriptions of some aspect of reality, for example the creation of the world or the mysteries of death and rebirth; though given their fluidity and frequent opacity it may be difficult to pin down what the exact truths are. At the very least, mythic narratives may be describable in terms of some kind of allegory, but care should be exercised that the process of such "other description" does not become arbitrarily or severely reductive. In general terms, myths do not seem to be so much quasi-scientific explanations as explorations concerning "us": not just with regard to society and the nature of social bonds but also about who we are, why we are and what we are. The rituals with which they are associated are enactments of identity, solidarity and reconciliation. These rituals further connect the myths to notions of the sacred and indeed the rituals may be regarded as dramatic enactments of what the myths obscurely express in words.

Although *Greek* is offered by Berkoff himself as an "allegory of London life", the narrative style of the play does not sufficiently define the problem it poses let alone solve it or try to provide any resolution or understanding. The play is based on Berkoff's personal experience, but without any precise structural relation of identity or representativeness being offered. Berkoff further reflects, "I was fascinated with

Oedipus and Greek mythology and the play became an allegory of London life, transferring the plague of Thebes to the virulent spiritual plague that I felt was responsible for the physical decay of London. The yobs, cheap and grim pub life, the emergence of the drab media and corrosive TV, ever-present and ubiquitous violence, football yobbery, the murderous activities of the IRA bombers."[3] The playwright's generalised and unfocused style exposes the play as being in desperate need of narrative and emotional precision: it is a long journey from Thebes to unpleasant pubs or football matches.

While the title and characters of *Greek* suggest links with a mythic past, the play also exhibits differences and discontinuities. The opera/play exposes thematic disorientations in its text which offers itself as an adaptation of Sophocles' original play, *Oedipus Rex*. Yet in *Greek*, the featuring of the plague lacks the cohesion needed to bind the plot. In Sophocles' text, the plague is the result of Theban moral degeneration, whereas, in Berkoff's play the ten years devastating epidemic in London does not seem to have any the explanatory or symbolic quality. The plague is featured by the playwright without any further explanation or even glancing connection with the main plot. The inclusion of the mythical plague in *Greek* only increases readers' bewilderment as Berkoff immediately abandons any hints of justification for its presence in the play, only mentioning it casually towards the end of the work. As a result, this catastrophic pandemic has had no real part in the action and no intelligible bearing on the plot or its background. The plague does not prevent Eddy from prospering in his new home and nothing that happens subsequently has any association with it. According to Berkoff, the plague is an allegory of "the gross acts of violence being perpetrated the length and breath of Britain […] bombs in pubs and massive displays of frustration at the weekly ritual called football."[4] It would seem that the plague for Berkoff is simply an expression of his detestation of life in cosmopolitan London and certainly not a consequence or expression of the ethical impurity of the city. The suspicion arises that it is there only because it was first in Sophocles, not because it has some organic function. But in Sophocles' original, the plague is directly linked to the fact that Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother. In *Greek*, on the other hand, the plague has already existed for some time,

[3] Steven Berkoff, *Free Association, An Autobiography,* Faber, London, 1996, p. 339
[4] Ibid. p.4

without any dramatic or explanatory subtext, prior to the main action of the play. Eddy's words in act two scene four further expose the chronological problem.

> EDDY
>
> Me! – who wants to clean up the city, stop the plague, destroy the Sphinx… Me! – who was the source of all stink!

Perhaps the pre-dating of the plague in *Greek* expresses Nature's anticipation of the protagonist's incestuous behaviour, but even that would not explain what role Eddy was supposed to have in cleaning it up. The moral aspect of the cause of the plague in Berkoff's treatment simply receives no argument. The plague in *Greek*, is certainly not presented as the *consequence* of Eddy's incest. *Greek* would seem to have some serious narrative flaws, and the play to have a problematic internal structure.

These contextual discontinuities and incoherencies in *Greek* can be found in several key moments in the text. For example, the attempt to present a scene of the police rioting comes across as at best very laboured. This riot scene does not possess any discernable structural purpose and there is no storyline flowing from it or connected to the scene. It is just there as an occasion for Eddy to go into a café. Similarly, the appearance of the sphinx in *Greek* also gives rise to concerns. As the plot operates, the sudden emergence of the sphinx in the play strongly suggests that its deployment is mainly for the sake of forcing in an element of the original, not because the narrative requires such figure. Furthermore, the sphinx is used to symbolise some kind of feminist ideology, but the point of this irritable and clichéd portrayal is far from clear. The audience is left wondering what the creature has to do with the actual plot of the piece. Sophocles' original takes the form of a mystery which must be solved for the stability and safety of Thebes. In *Oedipus Rex*, each step in the play is a further piece of the puzzle in which everything fits together with horrible logic and which will eventually lead to its tragic climax. However, in *Greek* the storyline merely drifts along with only the faintest memory of the Oedipus myth to give it shape. The main governing principle is that it should have something to do with the author himself. Even within whatever little shape the narrative has, there is little internal coherence in the plot, as the playwright does not attempt to connect the details of the story to one another.

Perhaps it is not all Berkoff's fault. From a musical standpoint, a composer is constrained by the literal elements found in the meaning of the actual text.[5] On the other hand, the verbal descriptions found within the text must be economised and shaped according to the needs of the musical argument; furthermore, the clarity of the words is inclined to be sacrificed to enable the piece to encompass the musical and emotional heights which are the special domain of music theatre.[6] David Adams highlights an aspect of this oratorical surrender in an operatic performance: "every voice teacher and reasonably experienced singer is familiar with the need to modify vowel sounds in different parts of the voice."[7] Moreover, in an adapted work like *Greek*, in order to create enough space for musical expression, the composer has to surrender many details of verbal style which form an integral part of the original text.[8]

Turnage himself reveals, "I just got stuck into cutting Berkoff's play and setting the lines almost as soon as I'd cut them. It was a strange way of working. *Greek* is a very wordy play, and the language is unbelievable – the opera libretto's tame by comparison."[9] The prologue of Turnage's opera is identical to the first five lines of act I scene i in Berkoff's original text.

> EDDY
>
> So, I was spawned in a Tufnell Park that's no more than a stone's throw from the Angel, a monkey's fart from Tottenham or a bolt of phlegm from Stamford Hill. It's a cesspit, right – a scumhole dense with the drabs who prop up corner pubs, the kind of pub where ye old arse 'oles assemble.[10]

Eddy's introductory speech gives a clear depiction of the setting for the piece as well as an indication of the verbal resources that will be on display. The protagonist's birth place, Tufnell Park, which is located in the East of London, is heavily affected by racism, violence and mass unemployment. By using words such as, "phlegm" and "cesspit", the librettist is reflecting the hero's resentment of the current situation.

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[5] See Peter Kivy, *Osmin's Rage: Philosophical Reflections on Opera, Drama, and Text* (London: Cornell University Press, 1988) p. 58-61.
[6] See Gary Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 10-12.
[7] David Adams, *A Handbook of Diction for Singers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. xi
[8] See Andrew Clement, *Mark Anthony Turnage* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) p. 15.
[9] Ibid.
[10] See Mark-Anthony Turnage and Jonathan Moore, *Greek* Prologue, the booklet accompanies the opera recording, Argo 44-368-2, p. 21.

However, compared with Berkoff's original text, Turnage has cut the following fifteen lines in order to incorporate the play into his musical language.[11]

Greek at least has the value of highlighting the concept of ritualistic offering which has always acted as an essential binding force of the great civilizations of the past - such as, the ancient Egyptian, the ancient Chinese and the Aztecan.[12] According to Adolf E. Jensen, "the killing […] is an unavoidable concomitant of the respective acts, while the true motives of the ceremonies may be sought in other contexts. In many instances there can be no doubt that the killing is essential, that it constitutes an important, even decisive, part of the event."[13] However, instead of remodelling the Oedipus myth to express a fresh understanding of the ills of British society in the 1980's, Berkoff roughly transposes the ancient story into a modern setting as an eruption of personal snobbishness and discontent. By tearing the Oedipus myth from its vital context, Berkoff fails to make sense either of the ancient myth or of the condition of the twentieth-century audience. The symbolism in items such as the plague and the sphinx are vaguely conceived and show no sign of having been carefully thought through. In Sophocles' account, the tragedy is explicitly tied up with the political aspect of the plot, the position and moral health of the state being strongly dependant on that of the king. However, as Berkoff himself remarks, *Greek* needed no extra research because it is basically only about himself.[14] As a consequence, almost every aspect of *Greek* is absorbed into the wrapt contemplation of Eddy/Berkoff which results in a prolonged narcissistic self reflection, and certainly not the intricate moral or political analysis found in *Oedipus Rex*.

However, even with its manifold narrative inabilities, *Greek* still provides an example in terms of the function of a mythic narrative and the problems and

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[11] The deleted words in Eddy's first stanza are as follow: "…the boring turds who save for Xmas with clubs…my mum did that…save all year for slaggy Xmas party of boozy old relatives in Marks and Sparks' cardigans who stand all year doing as little as they can while they had one hand in the boss's till and the other scratching their balls…they'd all come over and vomit up Guinness and mum's unspeakable excuse for cuisine all over the bathroom, adjust their dentures…rage against the blacks, envying their cocks, loathe the yids, envying their gelt…hate everything under thirty that walks and fall asleep in front of the telly…so they'd gather in the pubs, usually a smelly corner pub run by a rancid thick-as-pig-shit paddy who sold nothing but booze and crisps in various chemical flavours to their yokel patrons who played incessant games of cruddy darts, drink yards of stale gnat's piss beer and chatter like…" see Steve Berkoff, *The Collected Play*, vol. I. p. 101.

[12] See Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth,* trans. by Peter Being (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) p. 1-3; René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977) p. 6-11; 20-25.

[13] Adolf E. Jensen, *Myth and Cult among Primitive Peoples,* trans. by M. T. Choldin and Wolfgang Weissleder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) p. 162.

[14] Berkoff, op.cit. p4.

difficulties which may arise when it is adapted into a different social and historical context. But using solely literary models such as the works of Sophocles in order to identify myth does not provide sufficient material to distinguish it at the narrative level, and it is doubtful that a purely formal definition of the term can be provided. Although it is unlikely that we can pinpoint a satisfactory description of myth even in a literary context, there are still a few features that can be offered as general indicators. Firstly, myth tends to operate with a degree of remoteness which might be either (or both) chronological or geographical. Mythic narrative tends not to occur in the immediate present although distance may be achieved by other means such as being set in strongly different societies, shipwreck or freakish isolation. Secondly, mythic narrative has a tendency towards the elemental, when the issues being raised are of a powerfully basic sort, perhaps involving a stripping away of the fripperies of civilisation, for example. A certain opacity of cause and effect is also a common element in mythic narrative. Take the plague in *Oedipus Rex* for instance. The dramatic purpose of the epidemic at one level seems to be inviting allegorisation, while at the same time suggesting that unknown forces or mechanisms, which may often involve inscrutable divine retribution, are at work. Myth is usually narrated in terms of past events being framed in such a way as to raise important and wide-ranging questions such as divine justice in the here and now. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong tendency towards elevated language and highly stylised situations. And finally, myth is frequently concerned with social, religious or political order.

Mythic narrative can also be categorised into four different archetypes. Firstly, the narrative depicts origins, for example, the source of a lineage, city or society and this often entails an account of the genesis of certain accompanying social features and structures. This type of myth will also include theogonies. The second mythic archetype is a lineage/legitimacy narrative, which tells, for example, the story of how such and such a person came to be King and his pursuit and maintenance of power. The third archetype of mythic narrative is concerned with grave crises in public life in which the structure of society is threatened. The fourth and last type of myth is most often about insoluble conflicts in moral duties, especially among the ruling elites. Many of these narratives will concern themselves with gods or other supernatural entities and because of their narrative implications, it is not difficult to understand that a frequent theme in a mythic story is that of sacrifice. The sacrificial theme in mythic narrative will frequently involve the king or hero as representative of

his people. In order to restore the status quo, he has to sacrifice himself or a member of his family. Secondly, during a period of social crisis, a scapegoat may be found to carry and purge the burden of public guilt. One subtype of this would be Everyman as symbolic sacrifice. The third sacrificial theme in myth is encapsulated in the biblical story of Moses. As the liberator of the Israelites, the prophet can, mysteriously, never enter the Promised Land. His function as liberator exhausts his role and the sacrifice seems a necessary element of his finished achievement. Finally, sacrifice is used as *topos* or theme in a quasi-mythic narrative. As the modern world gradually turns into a more democratic society, people no longer have the king as effective surrogate for the community. The public's search for a social scapegoat has switched to the eminent members of the society, or even to "celebrities". The dramatisation of the life of the excessively daring Margaret Argyll represents a modern reflex of this type of mythic narrative. *Powder Her Face* is dealing with the notion of "tabloid myth" which is an attempt by the newspapers to construct a mythical narrative out of almost real events. The infamous duchess was only famous for her divorce from her second husband, the Duke of Argyll. The notoriously lengthy legal battle caught the public's imagination and allowed them a vicarious insight into the life of the upper class and with the concomitant effect of them being eager to see her humiliated and destroyed. Despite the strong presence of "moralising" this form has no sacred or even moral bearing.

This discussion, besides providing some general framework, allows us to return to *Greek* in the hope of further clarifying our problems. Even though *Greek* is clearly derived from the myth of Oedipus, this twentieth-century adaptation of Sophocles' original cannot be categorised as a form of mythical narrative. In *Oedipus Rex*, the king is the embodiment of the state and as such he is the source as well as the symbol of the health or weakness of the nation. The origin of the plague in *Oedipus Rex* is associated with the life and action of the king. On the other hand, in *Greek,* Eddy is merely the co-owner of a café which is not presented as having any symbolic or representational value in the play. The playwright has suggested that the protagonist in *Greek* is a representation of Everyman.[15] But the purpose of featuring an Everyman in a play is that in his ordinariness he can be used as a symbolic figure to represent the entire community. In this he must be *typical*. However, killing a

[15] Berkoff, op.cit p. 4.

sphinx is work for heroes, while marrying one's mother are neither typical nor the accepted social norm and it is hard to see how in either case they can be taken to be representative of society. Although Eddy has indeed committed incest, being merely a café co-owner, there is no reason to suppose that this moral deficit is applied to a figure with any general symbolic or functional position. Even as a scapegoat it would be hard to see what burden he might bear for the population at large. One element of the role of the ordinary individual can be that they become representative of the society around them and this representative status may often involve their sacrifice, even though the function of sacrifice in modernist thinking is considerably different from that of Greek tragedy. The final mock funeral procession gives the game away entirely. Eddy not only comes back to full, unblinded life, he cheerfully decides to continue his relationship with his mother. In other words the whole moral-mythic content of the play is simply discarded, the symbolic framework nullified and Sophocles jeered at - leaving us with nothing but roaring egotism. The impression is given that the final section has been hastily attached to the main story for shock value, not for the purpose of enhancing or developing the plot – though it unwittingly reveals the play's true intention. In order to create a balanced adaptation, it is crucial for the librettist to work out the actual dramatic function of the myth and its meaning before devising some analogue of the original to be re-interpreted in a completely different context. Structurally, because *Greek* does not feature a chorus, the opera instantly lacks the sense of formality which might have connected it with its mythic roots. The chorus, the signature narrative device in ancient Greek theatre, not only provides commentary on the actions through the formats of singing and dancing but also presents the ritualistic essence of this mythic genre. Unfortunately, Berkoff does not find a satisfactory analogue into which he might successfully transpose these vital contextual elements from *Oedipus Rex* into *Greek*, so he simply unloads into his adaptation the scattered bones of the story together with a few symbols which in consequence do not possess anything of the same effect or purpose.

Although a substantial libretto can stand alone as a literary text, its ultimate presentation still requires a composer's output to achieve the state of completeness. The outcome of the coalition of these two artistic forms offers its audience an orgiastic theatrical experience. Friedrich Nietzsche argues:

> Music and tragic myth both express, in the same way, the Dionysiac capacity of people, and they cannot be separated from one another.

> Both originate in an artistic realm which lies beyond the Apollonian; both transfigure a region where dissonance and the terrible image of the world fade away in chords of delight; both play with the goad of disinclination, trusting to their immeasurably powerful arts of magic; both justify by their play the existence of even the 'worst of all worlds'.[16]

Music theatre is the only medium in which the "Dionysiac" and "Apollonian" principles routinely collide. These contrasting principles are often seen as constituting two essential poles of attraction for human nature. However, aesthetic confrontation between instinctual, pre-rational musical expression has to find a balance with the rational, ordered verbal representation. Music can penetrate further into people's minds in the understanding of a dramatic situation. For example, in *The Bassarids*, the use of harp in the confrontation between Pentheus and Dionysus atmospherically enhances the presence of Dionysus. Henze's music therefore, adds a further expressive dimension to Auden and Kallman's words. The combination of "music" and "tragic myth" in a theatrical presentation exceeds the spectators' expectations in achieving their ultimate physical and spiritual heights. Nietzsche's argument intends to normalise Greek theatre in terms of "aspects of human nature", which everyone shares. These arguments present myth as being interiorised in the manner of Richard Wagner's theory of music drama. Sigmund Freud later absorbs the tenor of Wagner's arguments and psychologises them, associating such interiorised human conduct with the individual's problematic psychic history. The late nineteenth-century science of anthropology, on the other hand, takes a different route in interpreting Greek myth. It borrows from another new science, sociology, notions of social function and utility and attempts to explain myth and ritual in terms of social bonding and coded hierarchies, such as we see at work in Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* for example. According to this anthropological interpretation, ancient myth is the prime material to be examined and understood in the effort to understand its originating society but, unlike the psychological approach, it is not to be participated in.

Whichever style of reading we adopt, sacrifice should be considered one of the important elements in an operatic presentation and its appearance can be further

[16] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. by Ronald Speirs, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 115.

categorized into two themes; performers can be interpreted as the re-embodiment of the sacrificial victims such as those to be found in the ancient Greek era, while the verbal clarity in libretti must ultimately submit to the emotional expressiveness found in the musical language.[17]

Since the Renaissance period, the development of European music theatre has strongly mirrored important aspects of the history of Western civilization.[18] Furthermore, the golden age of the genre of western music theatre actually corresponds with the urbanization and modernization of the major European cities.[19] As modern Western society moved towards secularism after the renaissance period, people's fundamental need to investigate their spirituality had also found an outlet away from organized religion into a passion for music theatre.[20] For the aristocrats of that period, music theatre was a symbol which also re-enforced their role as the ruling class. To quote Peter Conrad's observation, "throughout the nineteenth century, opera is an alternative religion, and its characters profess to be recondite pagan gods, or else their priests and priestesses."[21] Music theatre, therefore, functions as the re-embodiment of the ancient sacrificial altar for the rapidly changing modern Western society.[22] The passage provides an indication that the genre of music theatre can always change with time in order to adapt to its contemporary society.

From the sociological point of view, the reason for primitive people's notion that it was necessary to perform sacrificial rituals was twofold: firstly to act as an instrument of social bonding and second, to offer gifts to the supernatural beings that

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[17] See Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001) p. 189-194; Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001) p. 134-135.

[18] See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Samuel Moore (London: Penguin Books, 1967) p. 223-225. Karl Marx, "Uneven Character of Historical Development and Question of Art" in *Marxist Literary Theory*, ed. by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) p. 34-35. Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 43-47. Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theatre In Paris In The Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Mary Whittall (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) p. 17-21.

[19] W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Book, 1968) p. 474. Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theatre In Paris In The Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Mary Whittall, p. 392-395.

[20] See Carl Gustav Jung, *Jung: Selected Writings* ed. by Anthony Storr (London: Fontana Press, 1986) p. 345-346; Matthew J. C. Hodgart and Ruth Bauerle, *Joyce's Grand Operoar: Opera in Finnegans* Wake (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997) p. 3-21.

[21] Peter Conrad, *A Song of Love and Death: The Meaning of Opera* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987) p. 71.

[22] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Monique Layton, vol. 2 (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977) p. 29-30.

they deemed it necessary to propitiate.[23] The word "sacrifice" etymologically derives from the Latin word *sacrificium* which signifies the action of *facere*, "to make" and *sacer*, "holy" in a religious context. A sacrificial rite would be a tripartite relation between the participants, the victims, and the god or deities with whom the participants intend to communicate. The whole concept of sacrifice can be interpreted as part of the human behaviour of ritual exchange: by renouncing the valuable object, the entire community would receive far more precious returns.[24] E. B. Tylor observes:

> Sacrifice has its apparent origin in the same early period of culture and its place in the same animistic scheme as prayer, with which through so long a range of history it has been carried on in the closest connection. As prayer is a request made to a deity as if he were a man, so sacrifice is a gift made to a deity as if he were a man […] but sacrifice, though in its early stages as intelligible as prayers is in early and late stages alike, has passed in the course of religious intention with which the worshipper performs it.[25]

Both prayer and sacrifice feature as essential elements in human cultures. While prayer may be personal, intimate and verbal, sacrifice is communal, presentational and extra-verbal. Sacrifice is the act of gift-offering in which by submitting treasured objects the worshippers are hoping to receive a god's favour in return.

Classical Greek drama provides one of the primitive examples of literary transformation in the function of sacrificial rites from the original purpose of ritualistic prayer into grand festive spectacle.[26] Although classical Athenian dramas remained attached to the religious context, in which the plays were performed in order to honour Dionysus during his religious festival, these theatrical works had a greater social purpose: to educate, to bind and to define the entire city state.[27] Ancient Greek theatre is the first step in the development of music theatre, enabling it to move on from its purely religious beginnings into an aesthetic and literal representation.

The entire repertoire of Athenian tragedy and satyr-play was, in fact, presented within the framework of the religious rituals which took place annually during the

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[23] See Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* trans. by W. D. Halls (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) p. 2.
[24] See Ibid. p. 19-49; Jeffery Carter, "General Introduction" in *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* ed. by Jeffery Carter (London: Continuum, 2003) p. 2-7.
[25] E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches in the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Arts and Custom*, vol. II (London: John Murray, 1920) p. 375.
[26] See Ibid; Paul Cartledge, "'Deep plays': theatre as process in Greek civic life" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 5-11.
[27] See J. R. Green, *Theatre in Ancient Greek Society* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 62-64.

spring season, in order to celebrate the Olympian god, Dionysus.[28] During this festive season, the theatrical performances and the ritualistic sacrifices were strongly associated in the Dionysian rituals.[29] Religious rituals in the form of theatrical representations faithfully captured the mythical and symbolic characteristics of the god. For the Athenian, Dionysus not only embodied the concept of the outsider, the "other" but also stood for the gods of wine: the untamed divinity in nature, which was strongly associated with power over sexuality; ecstatic possession; dance; disguise; and finally mystic initiation which would provide blessings for his followers in their afterlife.[30]

The nature of the tragic and satirical dramas perfectly demonstrate Dionysus' multi-faceted character; the offering of theatrical performances as a consecration to the god and can be regarded as a faithful oblation in celebration of the Dionysian cult.[31] Since its origins in religious ceremony and rituals, the classical Greek drama had gradually developed an increasingly independent artistic form and conventions, which eventually provided the foundation and inspiration for the development of secular western music theatre after the Italian Renaissance.[32] Although the origin of the theatrical art form arguably flourished within the Dionysian festival, the genre, in fact, was not purely a Dionysian phenomenon. Long before tragedy was invented by the Athenians in the latter part of the sixth century BC, the Greeks had been familiar with groups of worshippers who expressed their devotion to particular gods and celebrated festal occasions through richly varied patterns of formal songs and dances.[33] The muses themselves were also to be seen as a divine *choros* singing and dancing in honour of their father Zeus to the accompaniment of Apollo's lyre; this was the paradigm image for performance in the Greek polis.[34]

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[28] Ibid. p. 6-8.
[29] See Richard Green and Eric Handley, *Images of the Greek Theatre* (London: The British Museum Press, 1995) p. 34.
[30] P. E. Easterling, "A show for Dionysus" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling. p. 45.
[31] François Lissarrague, "What satyrs are good to represent" in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos: Athenian Dramas in Its Social Context* ed. by John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) p. 228-236.
[32] See Peter Burian, "Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 228-229; Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*. p. 9-12.
[33] See J. R. Green, Theatre in Ancient Greek Society, p. 4-6.
[34] P. E. Easterling, "Form and performance" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling , p. 157.

The most characteristic element in classical Greek drama was the utilisation of speech, song and dance. Furthermore, with the skilful use of rhythmic patterns in each theatrical presentation authors were able to engage the Athenian audience with the autonomous dramatic moment. At the most basic level of Athenian drama, rhythmical patterns were designed to give manifold cues to their original audiences: lyric metres for song and dance by chorus or solo performer, other rhythms, particularly anapaests, for sections of recitative, and spoken iambic lines for most dialogue scenes.[35] According to Easterling, "one of the basic functions of these formal patterns is to mark the difference between theatrical and ordinary discourse, reminding the spectators that they are *theātai* at a special event with its own established conventions and its own kind of artifice. As in modern opera, the audience understands from the formal signal of rhythm and delivery how to "read" what is presented."[36] Such patterns of performance practice in classical Athenian drama have provided an abiding influence in the concept of libretti composition throughout the following centuries.

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With the development of Christianity in Western society, the actual function of myth still remained ambiguous, for although people ceased to believe in the literal truth of these stories yet the mythic narratives were still being circulated and utilised as one of the main inspirations for artistic creations. When the belief system changed from paganism to Christianity in the West, from the mythological point of view, it was not simply that one metaphysical system was discarded in favour of another as the depicted figures and their actions ceased to be adequate to the task of underpinning the explorations mentioned above. In the case of Christianity, there was another ritual context at hand. One important reason for the early Church being strongly opposed to the theatre was its association with a rival set of theologies, where the Church wanted to claim exclusive access to theological truth and authority. Therefore, if the mythic stories were to continue they had either to undergo some

[35] Ibid. p. 157.
[36] P. E. Easterling, "Form and performance" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling , p. 158.

change of function and a corresponding relocation in ritual and performance terms or be strongly allegorised.

It seems excessive, however, to suggest that participation in the ritual involves a clear commitment to all the metaphysical implications that might seem to be involved. It may be true that the initial authority of myths lay in their cultic and sacred associations but the relationship is not static: it is similar to the notion that a king is a true king because he both rules effectively and is descended from a god; however, when he ceases to be effective, the claim of his divine descent becomes less compelling. So a myth is authoritative because it explores in a sacred context the sources of our world and our moral position within it; although the sacred context may be modified, the need for exploration remains. In this way, the fictive nature of the myths, together with the lack of total metaphysical specificity, is vital to their continued use after the displacement of the belief system or abandonment of their cult enactment, and historically, the movement is generally in the direction of complete fiction. Therefore, those stories remain, in some real sense, myths, but because of their detachment from sacred ritual, they have become secularised; it is not improper that we continue to use the word "myth", but it has gained a significantly new sense; and this transfer of meaning is made possible by a persistent overlap in the kinds of stories transmitted and the fact that they continue to answer to some need in the adopting society.

Throughout the entire period of the European Renaissance, the revival of classical Greek culture featured centrally as an inspirational guide for an era which can be regarded as the dawn of Western social and cultural modernisation.[37] In order to recreate the glory of the classical Greek civilization, the comprehension of its festive theatrical offerings remained essential. Although the first opera house was not opened to the public until 1637 in Venice, this newly invented theatrical genre had already served as the centrepiece of ceremony for a very limited audience, namely aristocrats, during the Renaissance period.[38] Like its ancient Athenian predecessor, the birth of music theatre still encapsulated the atmosphere of ritualistic celebration even though the aim of the ceremonies had changed their function from religious to semi-secular. Although Greek tragedy plays no greater role in furnishing subjects for

[37] See Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984) p. 98; 235-238.
[38] See Leslie Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History* ed. by Rodney Milnes (London: Thames & Hudson,

opera than for the spoken theatre of the seventeenth century and beyond, it does have a far more central place in the development of the genre of music theatre. [39] When Sophocles' *Oedipus* was staged in 1585 at Vicenza to inaugurate the Teatro Olimpico, Andrea Gabrieli had set only the chorus to music.[40] By the end of the century, however, the view that in ancient times the entire tragedy was sung had assisted the birth of the new form of music drama which would eventually be called opera.[41]

The use of chorus in ancient Athenian dramas also further narrows the gap between the spectators and the performers. It served as a group of specially designated witnesses whose dramatic function was to reflect and to respond to the main plot so the audience could be guided to appreciate the intended theme of the play. [42] Furthermore, during the Dionysian festival, the chorus also characterised satyrs, the untamed followers of Dionysus dressed with dishevelled hair, snub noses and horses' ears and tails, in order to express further comment and parodies of the tragedies featured at the main stage in a truly Dionysian manner.[43]

In Renaissance theatre and opera, we find those classical stories supplemented by quasi-historical narratives being retold and enacted with the assumption that they still have some sort of authority. But the belief in the gods and the supporting theological matrix has gone. Even more totally extinguished was the ritual support. One might say in consequence that the stories had been aestheticised. But because the stories come from ancient authors, they automatically carry some sort of authoritative guarantee in the eyes of the Renaissance elites. This relation to antiquity also had the ancillary benefit of providing a kind of foundational justification for the aristocratic society in which these forms function. Mythic features are so fluid that the transition of Hercules – Samson – Christ – feudal King is a strikingly easy one. A different sort of approach could be found in the observation that the shift in attention away from the sacred underpinnings of the narrative and onto the *kind* of story being told still

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1987) p. 9-18; Peter Kivy, *Osmin's Rage: Philosophical Reflects on Opera, Drama, and Text*, p. 8-14.
[39] Peter Burian, "Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 261-262.
[40] See Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, p. 24.
[41] See Leslie Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History,* ed. by Rodney Milnes, p. 9-15.
[42] Ruth Padel, "Making Space Speak" in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos: Athenian Dramas in Its Social Context* ed. by John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) p. 338-339.
[43] Richard Green and Eric Handley, *Images of the Greek Theatre*, p. 22; P. E. Easterling, " A show for Dionysus" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 37-40; Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology" in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos: Athenian Dramas in Its Social Context* ed. by John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, p.97-100.

enabled the addressing of the study of "us", with the cosmogonic aspects being replaced by an increased emphasis on the elemental or extreme features of action and that this is itself a source of power – and power to some degree equates with authority.

These elemental stories, because of their basic qualities may further be thought to convey fundamental truths about the configurations of human nature – these may not be messages from the gods, but the creative artist looks deeper into the structure and meaning of the world and carries back to us these powerful and sometimes unwelcome messages about what we are. This process reaches some kind of apogee in the nineteenth-century: for Matthew Arnold, religion is felt to have failed so decisively that art has to shoulder much of the moral and spiritual burden and the poet or artist becomes the new source of mythic truth. The artist also takes on the role of redemptive sufferer: his suffering for his art authenticates it and he becomes a quasi-religious object, ready to die for the redemptive power of art. He has become a messianic or priestly law-giver, *un monstre sacré*. Something similar had already happened in medieval Romance: the former epic hero, frequently an offspring of the gods, one who fights strange beasts or descends into the underworld, has become the knight-errant, surrounded by magic, sacralised by the quest for the Grail - and still slaying dragons. He is normalized in a social sense by returning from his quest to the embracing social structure, for example the Arthurian court – even from as far abroad as Byzantium. He is still an exceptional figure, but a member of a class of figures exceptional by birth as much as deed, as noble birth is here a surrogate for divine descent. Eventually personal qualities will tend to supplant birth, but the trend is not complete.

The contribution of the theatrical style of classical Greek drama towards the development of Western music theatre is not only manifest in its use of chorus but also reflects in the genre's incorporation of theatrical deixis. By employing verbal indicators in the text, the Attic dramas were able to intensify the dramatic situation in order to capture the audience's attention and direct them to concentrate on a specific dramatic moment.[44] This theatrical device has a fundamental role in the evolution of libretto composition.

[44] P. E. Easterling, "Form and performance" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 161-163.

While twentieth-century works have succeeded in attaining literary freedom by embracing prose-writing in place of predominantly versified texts, their predecessors of the past three centuries were still faithfully following the theatrical conventions laid down in the ancient Athenian dramas. The mad scene, for example in Salvadore Cammarano and Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) is designed to have the same dramatic pathos as in Euripides' *Medea*.[45] Such off-stage bloodshed and violence is suggested in Aristotle's *Poetics* in which the philosopher notes:

> Pity and terror can be aroused by what happens on stage. But the better authors are, the more they arrange the *muthos* to produce these reactions – and this is to be preferred. The *muthos* should be organized in such way that even if you never see the play, but only hear an account of what happens in it, you will feel a shudder of terror and pity […] we should expect tragedy to give us not indiscriminate satisfaction but what is unique to itself.[46]

In order to avoid the vivid depiction of both Lucia and Medea's savage actions of slaying their husband and sons, Cammarano and Euripides skilfully employ actors and choruses in the poetic depiction of the murder scene to the audience. Such suggested death scenes avoid the representation of real bloodshed on stage but still enable the provocation of horror and sympathy among the audience.

Composers and librettists gradually found that these conventions of representation were ceasing to have force, but realised, that in order to successfully unite words and music in the twentieth-century fashion, it remained essential to mark formally the level of speech register. The conventional dichotomy of aria and recitative as the fundamental structure for creating music theatre had already successfully been challenged by Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902). The absence of arias in Debussy's groundbreaking master piece particularly establishes it as a model for future composers. Because the aria as an expressive lyric effusion has largely disappeared from modernist opera and both librettist and composer still need a formal means of pointing to moments and passages that are to carry an extra burden of dramatic significance, it is necessary for composer and librettist to further distinguish speech register in order to set words to

[45] See *Medea* line 98-147 in Euripides, *Alcestis and Other Plays* trans. by John Davie (London: Penguin Books, 1996) P. 51-52.

music according to the needs of the plot. Composers in the twentieth-century fully enjoy this creative freedom to experiment with different methods of setting words to music. Mostly, when the composer wants to indicate or explore some significant emotion, he will do so via music; Samuel Barber for example does it with passages of swooning romanticism in *Vanessa*. Some composers, on the other hand, will do so in entirely the opposite way. At the end of Britten's *Gloriana,* Elizabeth is left to speak the entire closing sequence because the words must be heard and understood so that her inner struggle and personal sacrifice can therefore be fully revealed to the audience. But in general, the composer will not want his librettist to work exclusively at the level of banal language, such as "Pass the sugar" or "Close the door"; but neither will he often want ostentatiously "poetic" language in the middle of perfectly ordinary speech. To identify the different levels of recitative becomes a crucial process in creating an opera, as various styles may be used to signal various levels of interest or dramatic importance, hence the growth of the *arioso* style of writing marks an important development in twentieth-century opera.

These mechanisms are important for the achievement of effective theatrical practice because they are vital methods of expressing a human need. The creation of Athenian dramas reveals society's need for the representation of sacrificial offerings. Sacrifices frequently include references to thanks-giving (offering praise for a past good); expiation (seeking conciliation for a past wrong); and prevention (acting to avoid a future problem and insure thereby a future good).[47] In this way, by bringing forth a valuable object, the person performing the act of sacrifice is in fact imploring his god(s) to continue their goodness, or to end misfortune or to avert some danger in the future.[48] With these motives for offering sacrifices, it becomes possible to describe the act as a communication between cosmic realms, as a material expression of supplication impulses, or as a bargain between humans and 'higher' beings.[49] Drama recapitiulates these modes in a rite of imitation.

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[46] Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. by Kenneth Mcleish (London: Nick Hern Books, 1998) p. 18.
[47] Jeffrey Carter, "General Introduction" in *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* ed. by Jeffrey Carter, p. 6.
[48] See Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, trans. by W. D. Hall, p. 51-54.
[49] See Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice" in *Violent Origins: Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*, ed. by Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) p. 191-193.

The change of musical expression in the twentieth-century is a manifestation of new aesthetic needs which found their form in the introduction of modernism. Writers and composers in the twentieth-century were looking for a satisfactory narrative form where nineteenth-century bourgeois conventions were felt no longer to suffice either at an individual or social level. This narrative uncertainty in the twentieth-century is exposed, firstly through the composers/writers' disruptive uses of myth and secondly, for example in expressionism, in their deliberate effort to blur the reality/myth distinction and by sometimes blending into a Romantic mode for referential assurance. In this lack of confidence, the first exit point for composers/writers was the quest for authenticity in *verismo* or literary ultra-realism, James Joyce's *Ulysses* for example. This finds a kind of extreme point in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925) where the old-fashioned domestic drama is taken to such a point of total disintegration that there can be no redemptive tragedy in the work. A second remedy is *symbolisme*, as in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) and Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* (1918) for example. With *symbolisme* comes an interest in myth but not Wagnerian myth. The epochal symptoms such as the fragmentation of society or the individual personality, uncertainty about values associated with religion or conventional moral systems have a direct impact on musical manner. The assumption behind the lyrical effusion which was manifested in the later eighteenth and nineteenth-century operatic aria is that here the audience has truth and sincerity, a unique access to the inner character. This notion of sincerity is not easily available to the twentieth-century writers and composers as the audience tends to see such outbursts as "stagey" and, post-Freud, at least unconsciously insincere. That is, the viewing spectators see them ironically. Irony becomes a persistent mode in modernist writing; to many, perhaps to a majority, irony seems an appropriate response to alienation.

As myth was being secularised, something analogous was happening to ritual. Civic ritual always existed alongside the religious, even though there is a persistent tendency for one realm to try to invade the other: at its coarsest, kings like to claim divine right, or priests try to supplant kings. Ancient stories need to be secularised as much as possible because explicit theology is fenced off by the Church; on the other hand these ancient stories can be appropriated to the need for extra Court or civic ritual. In the sphere of Court art, this gives an impulse to the creation of an independent aesthetic, geared to the social and dynastic concerns that may be thought

to stand to one side of the official theological and cultic requirements. This is most obvious with regard to theatre and opera. Medieval drama acted as an extension of the liturgy and Biblical narrative; with the Renaissance, drama and opera also becomes secularised. It is notable however that both of these, especially opera, remain highly ritualised art-forms, though in this case in a civic context. From the time of its origin in the aristocratic courts of Italy, music theatre has been a conspicuously political art.[50] One of the earliest recorded operatic performances, *Dafne* in 1598, was to celebrate a civil union between two most powerful families. Music theatre was not only designed to mark the occasion but also intended to exhibit political supremacy. Such political implication still survives in twentieth-century works. *Nixon in China* (1988) depicts the clash of two political super powers and their leaders' intention to display their political influence through various "friendly" gestures. In this way, music theatre is able to reflect, in intricate and mediated formats, the significant political personages and events which have shaped the modern Western world, such as kings and coups, classes and class-conflict, rebels and revolutions.[51] Music theatre has also addressed many of the characteristic themes which constitute modern and contemporary political thoughts: monarchy and republicanism; the relationship between class, status, and gender; revolution and utopia; and the role of art and the artist within an increasingly complex society.[52]

Ritual and myth play a complex role in secular society: Court, coronation, the processes of election and government are all heavily ritualised and myths of various sorts are all-pervasive, even if not alway consciously so. While official theologies are yielded to the Church, the protean nature of myth allows a fluid slipping in and out of focus with regard to dogma while State ritual plays hide-and-seek with its liturgical analogues. Both myth and ritual are constantly re-moulded to allow for the exploration of human concerns and it sometimes seems that virtually any old myth can be pressed into service. The pervasiveness of myth does not indicate that there is no real or rational basis to public life; but it does mean that myth and reality overlap and one seems to need the other, even though the overlap is not complete or always comfortable. It can sometimes seem that the distinctions are being confused: politics

[50] Leslie Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History* ed. by Rodney Milnes, p.12-17.
[51] See Patricia Juliana Smith, "'O Patria Mia': Female Homosociality and the Gendered Nation in Bellini's *Norma* and Verdi's *Aida*" in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, ed. by Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) p. 94-95.
[52] John Bokina, *Opera and Politic: From Monteverdi to Henze* (London: Yale University Press, 1997)

can become a mythopoeic ritual in which the lines of reality are systematically blurred. For example, it is obvious to us that Louis XIV was not really a sun-god but everyone at the French court during that period was behaving as if he was and there was an enormous iconographic push to make it seem a reasonable connection. People will perform rituals as if they are reality and vice versa – what often counts is the assimilation of action or person to a mythic situation.

These imitative aspects of performing ritualistic spectacles in fact derive from the desire for religious sacrifices in human society. According to Hubert and Mauss' study on sacrifice, this religious concept of consecration requires tripartite relations between the "sacrifier": the benefactor; the "sacrificer": the performer; and the "victim": the offering. According to René Girard's study:

> The victim is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice.[53]

The central characters in music theatre represent a modern form of sacrificial victims in order to fulfil the audience's desire for achieving the ultimate *jouissance*.

The death of the protagonist in an operatic performance exhibits modern society's need for human sacrifice. The demand for the representational sacrifice on the operatic stage echoes Hubert and Mauss' anthropologic study on the subject of sacrifice:

> In sacrifice whose purpose is to fertilize the earth, that is, to infuse into it a divine life, or to render more active the life it may possess, there is no longer question, as before, of eliminating from it a sacred character. One must be communicated to it. Thus the processes of direct or indirect communication are necessarily involved in

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p. 2.
[53] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977) p. 6.

> operation of this kind. A spirit that will make it fertile must be fixed in the soil.[54]

In music theatre, performers are able to act as the medium which communicates between the paying audience and its ecstatic fantasy. By leading their spectators into the ultimate *jouissance*, performers have therefore fertilized the audience's spirit through their symbolic and ritualistic sacrifice.

However, according to W. H. Auden, the primary world of human sacrifice has lost its place in a sophisticated modern society; and the symbolic form of human sacrifice which exists in the secondary world, therefore supersedes its savage predecessor.[55] There are many "typical" themes of mythic narrative; besides those already mentioned, there are others, perhaps less amenable to operatic treatment, such as cattle-raids, shape-changing, vast journeys; all these themes are associated with the role of the hero and the situation of sacrifice. Music theatre answers modern society's need for the symbolic form of human sacrifice. The genre captures the characteristics of a primitive ritual in a cultivated and representative manner. The protagonists in such a genre ultimately have to submit their lives to their fateful destiny; as if being a selected victim, the performers offer their talents to their audience and receive a rewarding artistic recognition and financial return.[56] Furthermore, the art form can also encompass four different types of dramatic but symbolic death in a theatrical format, namely, "the sacrificial victim", "the epic hero", "the tragic hero" and "the martyr", which serve as regenerators for society. [57] With its highly emotionally condensed dramatic characteristic, the genre of music theatre re-captures the human's primitive compulsion for blood sacrifice in a fully public and modern display.[58] The role of a hero has been hinted at in the above with regard to Romance. Typically the knightly hero has a representative function and many of his situations and actions are ritualised – this is a long way from realist fiction. Ritualisation is necessary because of the hero's representative function: it has to be shown that he acts for and on behalf of his society and thus gathers to himself all the necessary symbols that allow this role to function. As it happens, the knight is more representative of his class than of

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[54] Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* trans. by W. D. Halls, p. 71-72.
[55] W. H. Auden, *Secondary World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968) p. 41-45.
[56] See John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 114.
[57] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds*, p. 13-14.
[58] See Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (London: University of California Press, 1997) p. 1-4.

society as a whole and this sectional interest is probably connected with the conspicuous scarcity of tragic sacrifice in romance narrative.

An operatic opus has always been perceived as being primarily a musical creation and the contribution from its librettist has tended to be neglected by the audience. Moreover, the libretto is not deemed to be a literary genre in its own right because of its conjunctive characteristic with its marital partner, namely, music.[59] As a renowned librettist, Auden reflects the difficulties to be found in attempting to master this unique art form:

> A librettist is always at a disadvantage because operas are reviewed, not by literary or dramatic critics, but by music critics whose taste and understanding of poetry may be very limited. What is worse, a music critic who wishes to attack the music but is afraid to do so directly can always attack it indirectly by condemning the libretto.[60]

Thus, the libretto is a literary orphan, which has failed to attain its legitimate artistic status as a literary genre in its own right. While a spoken play is centred on characters and a plot, an opera libretto, on the other hand, will admit and even require many elements, such as dances, choruses, instrumental or vocal ensembles, and spectacular stage effect, which contribute little or nothing to characterization or to development of the action.[61]

Music theatre, being the artistic hybrid of music, literature and spectacle, is designed to represent a condensation of human emotions, as the offering corresponding to society's need for ritualistic sacrifice and spiritual purification.[62] However, due to the genre's hybrid characteristic, the two main components of music theatre, namely music and words are continually challenging poets and composers to find a harmonious artistic union. In the early seventeenth-century the artistic battle between literary expression and visual effect took place in the English court, where Ben Jonson's verse rivalled Inigo Jones' stage design in their collaboration on court masques. However, Jonson's wish for literary coherence and poetic beauty was discordant with Jones' concern for visual spectacle. The poet finally admitted defeat and withdrew from any further collaboration after 1631.[63] It would seem that in the

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[59] See W. H. Auden, *Forwards and Afterwards*, p. 345-350.
[60] See W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) p. 349
[61] Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, p. 3.
[62] See Adolf E. Jensen, *Myth and Cult: Among Primitive People,* trans. by Marianna Tax Choldin and Wolfgang Weissleder, p. 59-64.
[63] See "Court Masque". Eric Walter White, *A History of English Opera* (London: Faber and Faber,

example of the artistic struggle between Jonson and Jones, the genre of music theatre encapsulates something of the contemporary concept of aesthetic values and their intersection with political trends. Furthermore, as an adaptation of pre-text literary works, the libretto can also pose questions of intertextuality, transposition of genre, and reception history. As verbal artefacts, the genre draws upon the broad spectrum of contemporary reading strategies ranging from the formalistic to the feminist. And finally, as text for musical realization, the libretto raises issues in the relationship between the two media and their respective traditions. According to such perspectives, libretti are not 'beneath contempt as literature', but very much within the purview of contemporary humanistic scholarship.[64]

The contested relationship between words [librettist] and music, [composer] not only shapes the presentation of a music theatre opus but also provides sources for staged discussions from the late eighteenth century until the twentieth century. For example, Richard Strauss, in his last opera, *Capriccio* (1942), attempted to resolve the endless debate by creating a muse-like figure, the Countess Madeleine, to invite the audience to join the everlasting debate – only to leave the task unfinished at the end of the piece as she exits the stage without informing the audience of her decision, or indeed if she had reached one. However, because of opera's strong association with the sacrificial theme, there is an element of compliance in the basic aesthetic element - the protagonists surrender to their doomed destiny, performers are required to submit their talents to their patrons and eventually the words have to yield to the musical language. David Pascoe further notes, "libretti have more uncertain status than conventional literary texts set to music because their genesis as well as their reception involve them in a different system of consideration […] the 'literary' qualities – ambiguity, complexity of metaphor, or visualization – have been […] expunged. In consequence, libretti tend to emphasise the communicative rather than aesthetic function of the language."[65]

The creation of operatic protagonists can be interpreted as a direct response to the public's need for sacrificial victims, epic heroes/ heroines, tragic heroes/ heroines

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1983) p.40- 48.

[64] Arthur Groos, "Introduction" in *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) p. 10.

[65] David Pascoe, 'Taking Liberties with English Libretti', *Essays in Criticism*, 44 (1994), 81-101 (p. 84).

and martyrs.[66] The protagonists in tragic opera are ultimately required to surrender their lives in order to regain the distorted order in the plot and further to achieve the audience's theatrical experience of catharsis in a musical theatre. In Vicenzo Bellini's *Norma* (1831), for example, the Gaulish priestess eventually offers herself up for sacrifice to be burned at the stake in order to re-gain the order which has been violated by her secret love affair with the Roman general, Pollione. The valkyrie, Brünnhilde in the German operatic trilogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876), heroically leaps into Siegfried's funeral pyre to initiate the new era of mankind and to end the rule of the gods. Indeed, music theatre itself can be considered as deriving from primitive sacrificial rituals for religious purposes and modern day opera likewise, to be a descendent of the ancient Greek drama which was the most essential communal and religious experience in its time. Unlike the nineteenth-century works in which the Romantic individuals are widely celebrated, music theatre in the twentieth-century has shown itself more interested in the study of fragmented and distorted personalities. Although there is no key to all the mythologies, modernism has brought with it a fearful knowingness that makes a simple escape into the convention of well-made drama impossible; drama, too has become knowing and self-conscious – with the danger that the very condition of drama's effectiveness is in danger of being undermined. Irony distances the audience from actions; it seems always to be mocking the event itself. Because the very nature of sincerity had been seriously questioned, composers and dramatists in the twentieth-century have lost any easy confidence in making grand musical and theatrical gestures. Fragmentation became a main characteristic of these modern works as composers started to mix various musical styles and librettists began to employ different narrative conventions in creating an opera. The lack of a common musical style goes along with a lack of settled narrative certainties. Some composers in the twentieth-century have been tempted to adopt/adapt idioms of the past to provide a secure reference point for their works, but it is just that seach for the familiar which makes the use of Romantic or *verismo* conventions, as can be found in Barber's *Vanessa* (1958) and Menotti's *The Saint of Bleecker Street* (1954) seem so anachronistic. Another manifestation of narrative uncertainty is the frequency of the "play within the play" motif and its near-

[66] W. H. Auden, *Secondary World*, p. 13-15.

companion, doubling of roles which not only presents an alternative version of reality but also depicts a symbolic re-play of the action.

The ceremonial and ritualistic function has always been the central theme in English music theatre since the genre was developed from the Elizabethan court entertainments and the Jacobean masque.[67] To quote Jean Wilson's study, "in their pageants, jousts and masques, the courts of Elizabeth and the Stuarts formulated their imagery for dealing with themselves and with their situation in relation to the ruler and to the country."[68] However, the fundamental theme which exists in the genre of music theatre, namely the ritualistic and choreographed sacrificial presentation still constitutes a basic subject in the English operatic repertory. Henry Purcell's aria for Dido's farewell elaborates a fine example of this and shows that, just like its continental counterpart, English music theatre can also offer both a visual and scenic extravaganza. In the mid-twentieth-century the English operatic opus has also been inspired by the suffering of the ordinary people; they too, surrender themselves in order to gain peace and recognition within their society. *Peter Grimes* (1945), by Montague Slater and Benjamin Britten, expatiated on the archetypal theme of an anti-hero within the English operatic canon. Echoing the success of *Peter Grimes*, Britten continued to feature a social outcast as the main character in his operatic composition *Billy Budd*, a work composed especially for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

The stylistic uncertainty in twentieth-century music is paralleled by the great manneristic diversity in writing libretti. Conventionally, in a libretto an aria was marked by a move from prose to verse. Wagnerian "through-composition" changed the rules for this kind of writing and the tendency, post-Wagner, has been for the change from plain recitative to be signalled by a change in linguistic register, from prosaic to figurative or "poetic". This change of register is interesting: realism requires a colloquial and "ordinary" mode of speech (seen in its most extreme form in *Greek*), but is often felt to be insufficiently expressive to capture the larger or more profound themes a writer may wish to explore; so a more "poetic", ornate or allusive register is needed to encompass these themes. This can also have some odd effects: in the middle of the pub scene in *Peter Grimes*, the protagonist enters and starts singing about the "Great Bear and the Pleiades"; this involves a sharp change of gear both

[67] See Jean Wilson, *Entertainments For Elizabeth I* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1980) p. 9-15; Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, p. 145-161; Leslie Orrey and Rodney Milnes, *Opera: A Concise History*, p. 49-52.

musically and linguistically. It has the effect of making Grimes seem very strange indeed, and it is not clear that this is the intention. It is however, the case that one of the major themes in the opera is alienation, and this sudden shifting is not an isolated event and as such requires some closer consideration.

Although sacrifice has its origins in the rituals of propitiation and thanksgiving, its relation to myth entails that it will drift with myth into a more secular and aesthetic role, though it will still concern itself with social cohesion, definition and reconciliation. This said, modernist representations are less inclined to allow their central figures un-ironic heroism, the suggestion being, that to be representative is not to be heroic in the older sense and that the strong roles of the past need to be tempered either with a knowing irony or placed in such a conflicting situation that what was formerly opaque has become dark and perplexing. Instead of featuring Lancelot the playwright will use Wozzeck. This is signalling a change in the function and apprehension of sacrifice, but is not its negation: the locus of sacrificial value has simply shifted to reflect a view of society which still seeks cohesion and identity but is uncertain as to how these may be achieved or represented. It may be by the isolation and punishment of the eccentric individual or the crushing of innocent in the quest for reconciliation and harmony, but the sacrifice remains a vital component.

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The main object of this thesis is to undertake a literary approach to twentieth century libretti in the English language. The analysis will pay considerable attention to the continuing employment of mythic devices and the frequent occurrence of the sacrificial theme which not only serve as an important basis for the theatrical narrative but also constitutes a profound part of its aesthetic value.

Each of the five chapters is designed to explore a different aspect of both the mythic and sacrificial perspectives which may be used in the structuring and meaning of the libretto. The first chapter explores the distinctly Dionysian character in music theatre. By studying operatic adaptations which are based on celebrated literary

[68] Jean Wilson, *Entertainments For Elizabeth I*, p. 13.

works, the important and indicative characteristics of the genre can therefore be revealed. Friedrich Nietzsche remarks:

> Thus the art of Dionysus customarily exerts two kinds of influence on the Apolline capacity for art: music stimulates us to contemplate symbolically Dionysiac universality, and it causes the symbolic image to emerge with the highest degree of significance. From these facts, which are inherently intelligible and not inaccessible to deeper examination, I conclude that music is able to give birth to myth, i. e. to the most significant example, and in particular to tragic myth, myth which speaks Dionysiac knowledge in symbols."[69]

Although opera is designed to be a balanced hybrid between music and words, a successful collaboration still depends upon the effectiveness of its narrative in creating instant emotional expression, something which can most powerfully be achieved by the musical language, the Dionysian part of the enterprise.[70] Therefore, reading a libretto can only achieve a limited and rational appreciation of the genre; because in an operatic presentation, music will have supplemented or even replaced words in capturing the irrationality of human expression.

The characteristics of music theatre can be analysed as being, firstly, intensively dramatic. The plot in an opera can often be criticized as being thin and lacking intricacy from the perspective of literal narrative.[71] However, the strength of a well conceived libretto will be found in highly intensified scenes. According to Lindenberger's study:

> The link between passion and opera has played a conspicuous role in the writing of certain major thinkers since Rousseau […] whatever historical lines one may draw about the presence and role of passion in opera, an insistence on opera's affinities with extreme human situations recurs throughout the major commentaries of all periods. By the same token, those who shy away from extremes do not make good opera composers [and librettists]."[72]

This dramatic tension is possibly one of the most important conventions in the genre of libretto and by creating passionate characters librettists and composers are also

[69] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. by Ronald Speirs, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, p. 79.
[70] See W. H. Auden, Secondary Worlds, p. 79-81.
[71] See W. H. Auden, *Dyer's Hand: And Other Essays,* p. 472-473.
[72] Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art*, p. 149-150.

paving the way to construct strongly expressive stage situations. A clear example is to be found in Act I scene ii of *Peter Grimes* in which the villagers' conversational dialogues are roughly interrupted by Grimes' poetic monologue. Here the librettist is intending to use a colloquial, almost naturalist manner to construct a plausible recitative while employing a high-flown poetic style to formulate a transcending aria. The transition is not easy: Slater's poetic style in *Peter Grimes* is at times excessively abstract, figurative and overly explicit which causes Britten technical difficulties to seamlessly transit from recitative to aria. The dramatic tension between the protagonist and the Borough finds some expression in Grimes' elevated diction. But his intense poetic soliloquy is designed not just to be an intrusion into the Borough residents' jolly and informal conversation, it also marks the nature of his difference, at once high-flown and discordant.

The first chapter titled, "Forms of Perfection" explores libretto as a literary form by studying operatic adaptations. Three of Benjamin Britten's operas, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Death in Venice* are featured as the foundation of the chapter. By the close study of the two different literary mediums namely, prose fiction and libretto, the idiosyncrasy of music theatre can therefore emerge. Dramatic intensity and the basic structure of each piece are the focal points of the chapter. In *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, in order to adapt James' original text into a musical drama, Britten and Piper shift the contextual structure from an intricate narrative game into a presentation about the corruption of the innocent. In Britten and Piper's *Death in Venice*, the librettist and the composer decided to shift away from Mann's intricate exploration of themes from Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner and focus upon the protagonist's internal struggle between self-discipline and his dormant homosexuality.[73] Claggart's aria in act one scene three in *Billy Budd* highlights and quickly establishes the character's evil intention almost, as we say, in the manner of a "stage villain". But these broad strokes are only indicative. In order to fully approach the literary qualities of libretto, a discussion of the operatic conventions underlying them is crucial and that is a subsidiary aim of the first chapter.[74]

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[73] See Peter Evans, "Synopsis: the story, the music is not excluded" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten's Death in Venice* ed. by Donald Mitchell (London: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 76-85.

[74] Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, p. 2.

The symbolic confrontation between Apollo and Dionysus in the opera also represents the genre's unique characteristic as a mythic art form. Aschenbach's ultimate death can also be interpreted as the decease of the Apollonian principle in the genre of music theatre. Apollo and his priest, Orpheus both symbolize the aesthetic principles of verbal discourse.[75] Auden notes, "[…] words, unlike notes, have denotative meanings; consequently, in most verbal statements there is no relation between the temporal succession of the words and the thoughts which they express."[76] Dionysus, on the other hand, is the embodiment of musical expression. Paralleling the unfortunate Orpheus who was eventually torn into pieces by the disciples of Dionysus; the relationship of words and narrative has to be adapted accordingly to achieve union with that other and intoxicated form of language, namely, music.

The symbolic rivalry between Apollo and Dionysus directly leads to the second chapter of the thesis which is titled "Unnerved Heroes". This chapter attempts to discuss the strategic function of male characters' as "*sacrifiers*" and "victims" in the realm of music theatre. As Hubert and Mauss explain:

> we give the name 'sacrifier' to the subject to whom the benefits thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects. This subject is sometimes an individual, sometimes a collectivity – a family, a clan, a tribe, a nation, a secret society. When it is a collectivity it may be that the group fulfils collectively the function of the sacrifier, that is, it attends the sacrifice as a body; but sometimes it delegates one of its members who acts in its stead and place.[77]

In music theatre, male protagonists are usually portrayed as a dominating force who lead the action towards either their own, or another's altruistic sacrifice.[78] Mittenhoffer, who in *Elegy for Young Lovers* consciously destroys people around him in order to provide material for the creation of his next work, is a prime example. And yet, the male protagonists such as Peter Grimes and Pentheus in *The Bassarids* can also be the embodiment of the unfortunate victim, thus carrying the burden of reflecting the essential theme in many operatic works. Three works constitute the

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[75] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. by Ronald Speirs, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, p. 119-124; Emmet Robbins, "Famous Orpheus" in *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth* ed. by John Warden (London: University of Toronto Press, 1982) p. 3-24.
[76] W. H. Auden, *Secondary World*, p. 79.
[77] Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* trans. by W. D. Halls, p. 10.
[78] See William Beers, *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992) p.59-66.

chapter; the treatment of each operatic opus aims to present a different perspective on the connection between male characters and their sacrifices.

In *The Bassarids*, sacrifice is presented in the form of punishment from an angry god. Furthermore, the work also highlights the alienation and unavoidable sacrifice resulting from the denial of human instinct. According to William Beers' study:

> The function of sacrifice is to channel the indeterminate danger of and desire for violence on to a surrogate victim. The destruction takes away the violent danger while at the same time giving expression to the violence. The use of the surrogate victim avoids any reciprocity for the violence because the victim represents a socially marginal and liminal being, that is, the victim possesses no effective retaliatory power.[79]

While in *The Bassarids*, Pentheus ultimately has to submit his patriarchal pride in order to calm Dionysus' rage against his tyranny, *Peter Grimes* and *Paul Bunyan*, offer different aspects of sacrifice. The protagonists in these two works eventually offer themselves up for sacrifice in order to permit the re-generation of their communities.[80] In *Paul Bunyan*, the giant cannot rest in possession of what he has built, and he must give it up for the stability of the new nation. His final farewell to his beloved pioneers suggests not so much an ultimate departure as a gesture to prompt them to continue the frontier work independent of his guidance.

Since the late eighteenth-century, male characters in music theatre have gradually lost the battle of popularity to their female counterparts who still fascinate librettists, composers and the audience to this day.[81] Since then composers and librettists have been more drawn to the pathos and conditions of tragedy in a drama than to representing historical or heroic deeds as did their Renaissance and Baroque predecessors. For this reason, the vulnerability of female characters in music drama has presented itself as a topic suitable to the artists' imaginations. However, unlike the masculine roles which predominately emphasize the militant facet of their characters; vulnerability and frequently even passivity in the face of human suffering

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[79] William Beers, *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion*, p.103.
[80] See Hans Keller, "Introduction: Operatic music and Britten" in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* ed. by David Herbert (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979) p. xiii-xxxi.
[81] Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* trans. by Betsy Wing (London: Virago Press, 1989) p. 5-7.; John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession*, p. 56-60.

are predominantly portrayed by the female characters.[82] Some aspects of this narrative function continue into the portrayal of women in twentieth-century works though there are subtle shifts in their evocation of pathos. Instead of drawing on the spectators' sympathy as in their nineteenth-century predecessors, writers in the twentieth-century focus more on the irony and horror which the heroines endure throughout the narrative. The comparison of the heroines' suffering between *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Alban Berg's *Lulu* (1939/1979) highlights the shift of the employment of pathos in music theatre. In *Lucia*, the audience will sympathize with the suffering heroine who has no choice but to surrender her mental stability in order to escape the demands from her family. The use of *bel canto* soprano emphasizes the composer's intention to conjure up the dramatic pathos throughout the entire work. On the other hand, the death of Lulu at the hands of Jack the Ripper comes at the end of a long downward spiral and is almost a relief for the spectators. Although they might be shocked by the final scene, Lulu's death appears to be the consequence of a series of horrible circumstances which she has been powerless to control even while exercising her function as seemingly autonomous agent. The third chapter, "Worse Things" is designed to explore female characters in operatic genre. Beers, again points out:

> The ritual reenacts the terror of merger and separation […] this reenactment gives men power […] which was originally located in the experience of the maternal self-object. The cultural function and result of this transfer of power is that women are excluded from exercising cultural power […] the need to sacrifice occurs when the male narcissistically invested social structures have their boundaries tested or threatened, that is, whenever self-objects intrude.[83]

By creating women as the sacrificial victims, the subconscious self-anxiety and vanity within the male self in the modern patriarchal society has finally revealed its true nature. Therefore, through the sacrifice of female characters the librettists and composers are guiding their audiences to undergo a new aspect of dramatic catharsis through their musical and theatrical experience.[84]

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[82] See Rebecca A. Pope and Susan J. Leonardi "Divas and Disease, Mourning and Militancy: Diamanda Gala's Operatic Plaque Mass" in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference* ed. by Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin, p. 315-318.
[83] William Beers, *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion*, p.146-147.
[84] See A. D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 74-79.

Phillip Hensher and Thomas Adès' *Powder Her Face* vividly illustrates an iconic *femme fatale* character in music theatre. The dramatization of the life of Margaret Whigham, Duchess of Argyll, further reminds the audience that the operatic vamp is not merely a cliché but is still very relevant and close to contemporary life. The opera creates a new way of portraying an operatic heroine. By doubling the singers, Hensher and Adès produce the illusion that the people around the duchess are watching her every move as though they were paparazzi. As a result, it is fair to say that tabloid newspapers have created a new context of predator and victim – in which Margaret Argyll becomes a pioneer sacrifice.

By contrast, in Menotti and Barber's *Vanessa*, the opera captures the heroine's submissive mentality towards gender roles established in a patriarchal society.[85] The work highlights the delicate balance between power and sexual dominance in a couple's affectionate bond. Vanessa has the beauty and wealth but she displays her emotional dependence by her fixated waiting for the one man in her life. By renouncing her happiness and youth, Vanessa seeks eventually to gain her salvation by the presence of Anatol junior. As the hero is ultimately able to adroitly [re]claim his father's mistress, *Vanessa* has espoused the conventional romantic view on the female operatic character as a passive receiver in the male-dominated society.

William Plomer and Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* originally written for Queen Elizabeth II's coronation ceremony, features Elizabeth I as the central character to suggest the coming of a second Elizabethan era. However, the librettist and composer's controversial decision to present the final years of Elizabeth I's reign do not appear to suggest an encouraging future for the new monarch. The conflicting narrative impulses in *Gloriana* influenced not only the theme and characterization but were also an important factor in the structural organization of the opera. In this way, it is suggested that Britten's experience of composing his Coronation opera was a partial re-enactment of the tragic experience of Gloriana herself.[86] With Gloriana's final spoken monologue, Britten and Plomer have not only created an unlikely operatic climax but also further participate in formulating the national myth during the period when Britain was still recovering from the devastation of WW II.[87]

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[85] See Dona Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) p. 8-11.
[86] Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004) p. 160-161.
[87] See Antonia Malloy-Chirgwin, "*Gloriana*: Britten's 'slighted child'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 113-115.

Apart from its capacity to manifest dramatic pathos in the presentation of operatic character, music theatre also possesses the ability to convey intricate political discourses. As John Bokina points out:

> Opera has been rightly characterized as 'extravagant', in part because its tendency to portray characters in the throes of exaggerated passions and emotions […] the personal dimension of politics is often characterized as a distinctly twentieth century concern…far from being a strictly contemporary concern, the argument about the expression or restraint of passions and emotions is as old as the conflict between the two patron gods of music, Dionysus and Apollo.[88]

In the fourth chapter, the political connotations in music theatre will be placed centre stage in order to forward its function in an operatic presentation.

Two of Alice Goodman and John Adams' collaborations have focused on major political issues in the late twentieth century, namely, the United States' foreign policy and the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.[89] In *Nixon in China* (1989), Goodman faithfully captures the precise moment of the American president's first official visit to Communist China and successfully portrays his administration's diplomatic ambitions.[90] The opera depicts this choreographed historical event in which the two countries' diplomatic negotiations blur the lines between reality and the news camera, between news and the presentation of news. By presenting a play within a play, the opera ironically points out the intricate interactions between all these characters and further highlights the ritualised illusionary nature of this historical meeting. The assassination of Leon Klinghoffer, on the other hand, highlighted the bitter struggle between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The opera's apparent lack of narrative structure and the librettist's conscious decision to omit any dramatic resolution suggests that the theme Goodman was eager to present is not quite the same as one might expect from the title. In fact the events of the hijacking of the Achille Lauro are not quite the real subject of the opera, but rather a pretext for a discussion of the generality and unavoidability of human suffering, a suffering that may be seen as

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[88] John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze*, p. 2.
[89] See George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 4th edn (London: Norton & Company, 2000) p.1206-1211; Beverley Milton-Edwards and Peter Hinchcliffe, *Conflicts in the Middle East Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2001) 100-103.
[90] See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd edn. (London: Norton & Company, 1999) p. 595-600.

more a consequence of the fall from grace of Adam and Eve than a result of particular political tensions. The characters move in a age-old mythic context governed by the exclusive invocation of the savage and retributive God of the Old Testament, and this, together with the failure of narrative resolution, does nothing to encourage an optimistic view of the situation or suggest that political issues are amenable to rational resolution.

Four works in the final chapter have provided examples of marriage in music theatre. Each opera draws attention to a specific aspect of this artistic matrimony. The genre of music theatre exists in a form of marital union, in which words and music are inextricably bound together throughout the entire dramatic representation.[91] In *The Elegy for Young Lovers* (1961), the proposed marriage of Tony and Elizabeth constitutes a spur to the creative energy of the aging poet, Mittenhofer, whose masterpiece could not be finalised without the young couple's ultimate sacrifice.[92] In *The Saint of Bleecker Street* (1954), Annina is finally able to accomplish her dream of being united with her Saviour. However in so doing she eventually surrenders both her life and her relationship with her beloved brother Michele.[93] The heroine finally surrenders her life within the context of a bitter conflict of systemic demands from both her sibling and her less-fortunate community. *The Knot Garden* (1970) further discusses the nature of the marital institution. The three couples in the piece can be read as the librettist's interpretation of the characteristic form of matrimonial union to be found in the second half of the twentieth century. The composer's juxtaposition of mythic archetypes in his grand theatrical scheme is clearly intended as description, diagnosis and mystic cure all at once, but rather results in an over-laden narrative crowded with fragments and pastiche which fails to communicate with any clarity. Finally, a tripartite marital collaboration can be found in *The Rake's Progress* (1951). This is a twentieth-century *opera buffo* in which the granting of Everyman's wishes results either in Hell or madness. Stravinsky, Auden and Kallman combine the *buffo* element with the mythic ingredient of the Faust legend to construct the opera's unique narrative style. As a result, the opera deliberately employs an anachronistic style and content that is refracted through a modernist treatment to point simultaneously backwards to the eighteenth-century and forwards to the twentieth. The simple

[91] See Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto*, p. xvii-xix.
[92] Ibid. p. 89-92.
[93] See John Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti* (Garden City, Doubleday & Company, 1985) p. 71-73.

contrast in Hogarth between the pastoral and urban, with the pastoral scene remaining the locus of true value, health and sanity against the inherent corruption and depravity of the city, is not being contradicted but strongly modified by the presence of Mephistopheles who uses the city as an instrument of his scheme. Through *The Rake's Progress*, the composer and the librettists have created a perfect example of how a *buffo* myth can be updated and transformed.

1
Forms of Perfection

Stories in the genre of music theatre are often constructed through the employment of mythic narrative. The term can be shown to have five narrative aspects. Firstly is the problem in which a society or a kingdom is troubled by strange events such as plague, abnormal behaviour or unusual weather. In the Oedipus myth, the protagonist's most unfortunate self discovery is due to the widespread plague epidemic which is threatening the very existence of the Theban state. Secondly, a hero is essential to the narrative style as he is identified to solve the existing problem. The heroic character can be a king, an everyman or unusually heroic character who can act as society's representative. As the king and the representative of the Theban state, Oedipus takes full responsibility for the cause of the plague. A mythic narrative will frequently feature a journey or a quest which is undertaken to the supposed seat of the difficulties. The journey will also involve hardship, assistance from a sympathetic bystander, communication with unseen gods or other mysterious entities and often involve rash vows or promises that will remove some obstacle. In order to successfully complete the journey, the hero has to endure a bitter struggle or a battle in which he will eventually triumph but pay a terrible price either directly or via a proxy, such as his wife or daughter. This particular process which leads to the hero's ultimate victory may, for our purposes, be called sacrifice. Sacrifice as a device in a mythic narrative can itself give rise to various themes as the subject can capture the representativeness of society, purge the sin and culminate in community cohesion. Death, whether altruistic or involuntary, is also a fundamental element in the theme of sacrifice and such abstract narrative scheme is also able to provide great variability of victim for the artists to tell the story. Finally, reconciliation will ultimately be established and the wrath of the gods is appeased and normality may resume.

The structure of mythic narrative is not only able to occur in a turbulent society but also exists within a stable one. For example, this style of narrative can also be used as a foundation narrative to explain the formation of some dynasties.

The narrative scheme is also clearly related to the rituals of sacrifice and appeasement. Mythic narrative can also be seen not just in the topics of Greek drama but also in their hieratic manner of performance practice, in which its presentation skilfully eschews naturalism, emphasises their symbolic, representative nature and is completed by the use of masks and stylised gestures. The discussion above is intended to indicate only a loose schema of mythic narrative. In such narrative method some elements may be missing, substituted or symbolised throughout the narration but it is the general outline of the story which establishes the character of this type of narrative. Such narrative schema only provides the bones of a story. As a result, there are only a limited number of the various possibilities that are more or less likely to appear in a mythic narrative; furthermore, the schema illustrates nothing about *how* the story is told or who the actors are, even though conventionally they tend to be nobility. Stories, however, can be told in a vast number of different ways, and each difference will be significant. However, not all these various ways of telling can be transferred to the stage and even fewer to the operatic stage. The genre of music theatre places severe restrictions on the possibilities of point of view in narration which has become immensely important in modern prose fiction. Similarly, narrative voice can colour a story in an infinitely varied manner. Not even the chorus can supply this. Therefore, attention needs also to be paid to the devices used to make the story concrete in performance. On the other hand, the music brings other dimensions and possibilities to the narrative. Music in particular can supply some of the aspects of narrative tone and such device is largely dependent upon the use of musical rhetoric. For example, during the Renaissance period, composers tended to use a method of set keys to indicate emotional colour which they used as a narrative device to guide the audience to the centre of the story.

In late eighteenth-century France, at the zenith of the artistic debate on the future development of opera, Michel de Chabanon declares a controversial argument:

> The theatre has its own laws, statutes and conventions which, in more than one way, conflict with the methods of music. In this contest (even enmity) of two arts which are associated in order to produce one and the same effect, the task of balancing their prerogatives, regulating the sacrifices which they must make reciprocally, and pronouncing between them a pact of union

> from which the perfection of the performance results – this is the most difficult task we have to fulfil.[1]

Chabanon's opinion depicts the debate and controversies surrounding the subject between *tragédie en musique* and *opéra* in eighteen-century Europe. Chabanon intends to demolish the view which suggests music itself is sufficient to be an independent language without the need for mere words. Such controversial argument indeed strongly influenced the style and content of the genre of music theatre in the eighteenth-century. For a twenty-first century reader, Chabanon's view can stand as a symbol of the recurrent and complex problems to be found in the relation between libretto and score, problems which have not diminished in the new millennium. For centuries, the transformation of literary works into libretti has provided a formidable challenge for both librettists and composers and the two distinctive art forms have undergone the adjustments required to enable them to be forged into a unique musical and theatrical representation.

This fluctuation of importance between words and music arises, of course, out of the hybrid nature of opera. Throughout its development during the last four hundred years, the relationship between words and music in opera has never been stabilised. It is clear that the libretto suffered for some time from the limitations imposed by musical form, while it is also the case that music suffered from a denotative deficit, thus showing that the libretto can supply the more meaningful content that "pure music" so clearly lacks. There are also contingent variations of musical and dramatic style (is Italian opera in fashion?) which in turn give rise to the enormously varied nature of the narrative forms that opera can utilise. Furthermore, being a conservative medium, music theatre also carries a heavy burden of past achievements. There is also a strong tendency for operas to copy the dominant literary form at their time of composition, such as classic drama in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, the novel in the nineteenth-century and the stylistic genre-chopping mixtures in the twentieth-century which demonstrate an interest in fragmentation and alienation in content and characterisation. It is clear that, for most

[1] "le Theatre a lui même ses loix, ses statuts, ses conventions, qui, en plus d'un point. Dans cette procédés de la Musique. Dans cette lutte (Presque ennemie) de deux Arts associés pour produire un seul & même effect, balancer leurs prérogatives, régler les sacrifices qu'ils doivent réciproquement se faire, & prononcer entre-eux un pacte d'union, d'où résulte la perfection du spectacle, c'est la tâche la plus difficile que nous ayons eue à remplir.", my translation. Michel de Chabanon, *De la musique considerée en elle-même et dans ses rapports avec la parole, les langues, la poésie, et la theatre* (Paris,1785) p.6.

part, a libretto cannot deploy the discursive materials which are so taken for granted in novel or drama. And yet there is an equally strong tendency to utilise these other more loquacious genres as the basic materials of operatic narrative. The result is that a great deal of pruning is required, not only of the words but also of characterisation and event. The essence of the story has to be condensed. As hinted above, one common method of achieving this effect is to concentrate on mythic stories. This possibility arises because in mythic narrative setting and action are frequently condensed, opaque and under-motivated, clichés and banalities, such as the wrath of gods, the need for sacrifice and absurd vows can be used as short-cuts to the crucial and emotionally over-heated situations which constitute the essence of the genre of music theatre.

One manner that modernism has bequeathed to recent opera is that of expressionism. This involves a ritualisation of pure emotion and raw experience isolated from detailed and motivating circumstance; violent emotion welling up from unknowable, mysterious depths far beyond the reach of rational understanding. A corollary of this is an interest in mythic, archetypal or even clichéd narrative that side-steps the need for detailed and rational explication in favour of the immediate and extreme expression of emotion. This aestheticisation of myth blurs a number of crucial boundaries, especially between the sacred and the profane, therefore authors and audience need stylised cues to signal that a certain set of responses is being evoked or alluded to. Prominent among these are certain stock situations and themes, such as that of sacrifice but not every narrative is mythic, nor is every sacrifice part of a ritual. However, in traditional stories of romantic love, sacrifice is a constant theme or device. The reason behind this constant juxtaposition is that romantic love shares with myth a high level of narrative stylisation. On the other hand, the theme of sacrifice is still able to generate a quasi-religious response with its subtext of altruism stripped of its ritual context.

Creating an operatic adaptation from a literary masterpiece such as Virgil's *Aeneid* can produce an easy gateway for the audience to appreciate the composer and the librettist's theatrical reading of the piece; however, it also spawns a further question on the degree of congruence between the integrity of the original and the final operatic representation. Gary Schmidgall reflects: "[the] qualities of excellence in a literary work may obstruct or render impossible an operatic translation […] a work may be intrinsically ill suited to the sensibility of a composer […] far from the

true greatness of a work may each be the source of its attraction for librettists or composers in a particular operatic era."[2] The librettist and the composer may consciously surrender a specific part in the original material in order to fit the subject into their conventions of music theatre.

The practice of adapting literary works is not novel to the twentieth-century. It has not only inspired numerous composers and librettists but also provided them with countless sources for their collaborations. Julie Sanders' study reveals:

> Myth as archetype undoubtedly concerns itself with themes that endure across cultural and historical boundaries: love, death, family, revenge. These themes might in some contexts be deemed 'universal', and yet the essence of adaptation and appropriation renders the mythical archetype specific, localised, and particular to the moment of the creation.[3]

Indeed, throughout the last four hundred years of Western music theatre, ancient myth has continuously provided both composers and librettists with artistic inspiration. Virgil's heroic, passionate and dramatic description of the affair between the Trojan hero, Aeneas and the Carthaginian queen, Dido, in his national epic, *Aeneid*, for example, has provided the source for works as disparate as Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) and Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1863/1890). Even though the librettists presented totally different outcomes in these two music theatrical pieces, the plots still followed (in some useful sense) Virgil's original work.[4]

Even though both Purcell and Berlioz successfully transformed *The Aeneid* into masterworks for the operatic stage, not every literary adaptation has achieved equivalent critical acclaim and some were destined to be forgotten almost immediately after their premiers. In relation to the methods in which the themes are expressed and explored, an operatic adaptation has a tendency to truncate, prune and even to mess about its original. Furthermore, it is difficult for an operatic adaptation to explore its literary original in detail within the tight constraints of music theatre. By its very nature, libretto will always rely on music to provide the further detail in giving the expressive colour for the piece. Perhaps it is for this reason that mythic narrative holds such a constant place in the genre of music theatre. By its very

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[2] Gary Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 4.
[3] Julie Sanders, *Adapatation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006) p. 71.
[4] See Roger Savage, "Dido Dies Again" in *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth*, ed. by Michael Burden (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) p. 23-24; 29-30.

essence, myth brings extra material and expectation to the narrative which mould the piece into a complete whole. When they use a well-known literary work as the foundation of an opera, the librettist and the composer immediately establish a rapport with their audience. For example, book four from Virgil's *The Aeneid* was considered essential reading as virtually a stand-alone text from the middle ages on. As a result, in using the story of Dido and Aeneas, composers and librettists would gain not only a basic structure for their opera but would also have immediate access to a range of presuppositions and emotions in their audience which can then be shaped and manipulated to immediate and local purpose. But of course in adapting a literary work for the operatic stage, both the librettist and the composer have to find the musical potential in that work. According to Sanders' study, "adaptation can be a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself. It can parallel editorial practice in some respects, indulging in the exercise of trimming and pruning; yet it can also be an amplificatory procedure engaged in addition, expansion, accretion, and interpolation."[5] Benjamin Britten's version of Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960) can be seen as one of the successful examples. The piece received its premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival and was considered to be another high point in the composer's career. The next year, it was performed in Covent Garden, Hamburg, Berlin, Milan, San Francisco, Zürich and Tokyo.[6]

In the libretto, Britten and Pears tried to retain most of the Shakespearean wording and indeed only added one line for the character, Lysander, in the first act – "compelling thee to marry Demetrius". However, even such an authentic adaptation still required structural alteration of the original play in order to accommodate the musical declamation which would enable the musicalisation of the Shakespearean rhythm, namely, iambic pentameter.[7] Similarly, the majority of the first scene was omitted, although some of this text was transferred to the final Act of the opera. Thus, Shakespeare's formal balance, whereby the action opened and closed in the "civilised" world of Theseus' court, with this world framing the magical woodland

[5] See Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 18.
[6] See "Midsummer Night's Dream, A", *The New Grove Book of Operas*, ed. by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1996), 425-427.
[7] See Mervyn Cooke, "Britten and Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream" in The *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 129-146.

scenes, was broken.[8] The considerable cutting of Shakespeare's text in the opera does not, however, damage its authenticity as, in terms of performance practice, cuts in Shakespeare's plays are so frequent as to be normal. However, the composer and librettist's decision of which lines to keep and which to leave out does have a strong impact on the direction of the opera's final presentation. Britten deliberately omits the scenes in Theseus' court and exclusively concentrates on setting the opera in the forest, thus showing the composer's intention to present the mystic element and ignore any political or naturalistic social implications in the original play. Through his keen power of orchestration and an almost unique gift for setting iambic pentameter verse, Britten was able to create one of the very few truly successful musical transformations of both Shakespearean poetry and drama.[9]

Benjamin Britten's three operatic adaptations of novels *Billy Budd* (1951), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *Death in Venice* (1973) demonstrate the different possible outcomes and methods in the mutation from verbal descriptions to musical expressions. However, without his librettists' contribution the composer would not have the verbal framework within which to express his understanding of those original texts in musical terms.[10] The librettists of these three celebrated English operatic works not only set an example of transforming fictional prose into music theatre but also have successfully provided the composer with the operatic elements and the musical space which was not contained in the original literary works. On the other hand, by adapting these novels for the stage music theatre, these librettists are frequently providing different aspects of verbal realisation in order to accommodate the needs of musical and theatrical presentation. For example, one of the main critical talking-points in James' *The Turn of the Screw* is whether or not the ghosts are to be read as real. However, it is clear that in the opera, Britten and Piper are not the least interested in posing the narrative puzzle in James' original. By having the ghosts singing on stage and interacting with the other characters the composer and the librettist have made any doubts concerning their real existence almost impossible to entertain. Furthermore, the addition of the "Malo" school-rhyme and the very obvious anachronism of the quotations from Yeats indicate that the real topic for the

[8] Claire Seymour, *The operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004) p. 226.
[9] Gary Schmidgall, *Literature As Opera*, p.5
[10] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Opera* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) p. 50-58.

opera is elsewhere: the ruin of childhood innocence. In this context, ghosts are just a narrative device, a gadget to generate an interesting story line.

These questions of narrative focus and thematic resource lead naturally to a more detailed set of issues. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* is constructed with at least three layers of narrative. As a result, the story (deliberately) refuses to settle on a single interpretation.[11] Vivien Jones reflects the difficulty for any adaptation of James' work:

> We have no certain evidence, we have only her version of what happened. It is this ambiguity which has taxed and fascinated readers […] It also makes *The Turn of the Screw* particularly resistant to successful adaptation […] The playwright, or librettist, or composer brave enough to try has the choice between commitment to one interpretation and the formidable task of reproducing in another medium ambiguities which in James are so inextricably part of our experience of reading the governess' account of events at Bly.[12]

Britten and Piper create a simplification of James' text. In order to capture the atmosphere of the original, Myfanwy Piper opens the opera with not only the description of the dramatic setting for the story but also underlines the governess' seclusion and helplessness in this working condition: "She was to do / everything - be responsible for everything - not to worry / him at all – no, not to write, but to be silent, / and do her best."[13] With such a dramatic setting, the libretto subtly supplies the composer with a mysterious atmosphere for the music to work in, an unease which will soon be heightened by the re-appearance of the singer of the Prologue in the role of Quint.

The opera is tightly structured as a musical theme with fifteen variations, each of them following seamlessly in a dramatic progression - which gives the piece the sense of a much more condensed and structured work than James' original. As a result, the novelist's slightly rambling, ruminative prose is replaced by tightly constructed compact scenes that follow smartly one on the other, separated and framed by the musical variations which comment on and amplify the material of the

[11] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, p. 182-183.
[12] Vivien Jones, "Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw'" in *Cambridge Opera Handbook, Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw*, ed. by Patricia Howard, p. 1 – 2.
[13] Benjamin Britten and Myfanwy Piper, *The Turn of the Screw*: Prologue.

scenes themselves. The music drives the opera forward at a relentless pace. The interludes which separate each scene provide no respite because they are tightening variations on the central tone-row. Precise and crucial moments are chosen from the original text and delivered sharply in the musical format. Most of the scenes in the opera are short and on average only last some five and a half minutes, within a range of two to twelve minutes. The two longest scenes are featured at the end of each act and are used to build up a dramatic climax. Furthermore, the opera has no exact indication of the passage of time between scenes or of the structuring of entrances and exits for characters. Britten and Piper accurately provide a series of cinematic snap shots of the plot which are tightly inter-connected with one another to fully exploit the possibilities of James' eerie story.

However, instead of trying to capture James' multi-faceted narrative style, the composer and the librettist go straight to the main business which is the concrete depiction of the governess' account. The reason behinds this significant departure from the original reveals the major differences between the presentation of opera and fiction. In James' novella, the main object of the work is in playing with the game aspect of a story in which the reader is meant to question every angle of plot as the story goes along. Britten and Piper's opera on the other hand, has to provide an explicit visualisation of the story; furthermore, the narrative style implicit in operatic staging strictly constrains the opportunities for ambiguity.

An example of the kind of problems which awaits the librettist in adapting James' text is the treatment of the ghosts, as the manner in which the plot is interpreted will hinge in large measure on the way they are treated. Because in the James' original the main plot is solely based upon the governess' own account, the ghosts' exact status remains essentially ambiguous. It is this ambiguity that constitutes one of the most notable aspects of James' original. Edmund Wilson, on the other hand, provided an alternative way of dealing with for the story. "I don't think […] that both the ghosts and the children are imaginary. I think we must accept the children as real […] they have actually been exposed to rather bad influences in the groom and the former governess, whom, I take it, we must accept as having existed, too, it is the new governess who makes the real trouble. She has been flattered by the uncle; but isn't it the boy that she really falls in love with? […] She has made the little girl ill and when she has the boy to herself she scares him to

death."[14] The passage reflects Wilson's "Freudian" interpretation in which the ghosts are the projections of a sexually frustrated young woman and provides one (somewhat reductive) way of dealing with ambiguities. But even within such an explanation, the uncertainty of the two mysterious characters still haunts readers' imaginations. The structure of Britten and Piper's *The Turn of the Screw*, tries to maintain this uncanny sense (mainly by musical means) while on the other hand, making a significant changes to James' original design. In the novella, the story opens with an introduction in which the novelist twice frames the governess' account of her side of the story. Then James presents her detailed version of the event at Bly in twenty-four narrative sections, each section no more than five pages long. In the opera, even though the Prologue has some resemblance to the novelist's original introductory setting, it provides no independent framing persona and Britten and Piper cut straight from there to the substance of the action at Bly.

Whether Bly was actually haunted by Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, or all the ghostly presences were merely products of the governess' imagination, the remote surrounding has to be counted to be one of the main factors leading to the tragic conclusion.[15] Although the piece is not strongly associated with a dominating symbol such as the sea which is to be found in *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*, a sea image still acts as a crucial disorienting element in the story. For Flora, the lake outside the house was "a great wide sea"; the lake was the place where Miss Jessel was first seen by the governess and the initial location in which she is seen to attempt to lure the girl.[16] The lake in *The Turn of the Screw* could be interpreted as a symbol of the mysterious power which is able to lure its victims into being willing sacrifices for its spells; it further associates Flora with the death of Miss Jessel who is eager to charm girl into joining her. In the event, Flora is finally saved by Mrs. Grose's abrupt departure with her to London.[17]

The libretto carefully follows James in portraying the governess who, unlike Vere and Aschenbach, is young and inexperienced, new to her job and eager not only to demonstrate her ability but also to win her employer's attention. While the

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[14] See Edmund Wilson, *Letters on Literature and Politics 1912-1972*, ed. by Elena Wilson (London: Routeledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) p. 236.
[15] See Vivien Jones, "Henry James's The Turn of the Screw" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten The Turn of the Screw*, ed. by Patricia Howard, p. 16-17.
[16] *The Turn of the Screw*: act I, scene vii.
[17] See Patricia Howard, "Structure: an overall view" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten The Turn of the Screw*, ed. by Patricia Howard, p. 71-89.

governess' enthusiasm towards her new job is clearly depicted on her way to Bly, ("Very soon I shall know, I shall know what is in store for me. / […] Poor babies, no father, no mother. But I shall love them as I love my own.") the heroine's lack of confidence soon emerges from her monologue:[18]

> If things go wrong, what shall I do?
> Who can I ask, with none of my kind to talk to?
> Only the housekeeper, how will she welcome me?
> I must not write to their guardian,
> that is the hardest part of all.
> Whatever happens, it is I, I must decide […].
> No! I've said I will do it, and for him I will.
> There is nothing to fear. What could go wrong?[19]

The sense of anxiety and agitation about her job is deeply rooted in the heroine's conscientious personality. The governess' personal anxiety provides a superb means of constructing dramatic intensification in an operatic adaptation.[20] This external and internal isolation of the governess directly lead not only to the formation of her exaggeratedly favourable impressions of her pupils which is replaced by an increasingly sceptical attitude towards Flora and Miles, especially following receipt of the letter regarding Miles' dismissal from his school. This over-compensating anxiety culminates in her obsession to correct the boy's seemingly haunted and corrupted soul. And this obsession will, of course, result in Miles' tragic death. According to Patricia Howard's study:

> Her growing involvement with Miles, her need to question every area of his experience which falls outside her direct observation, her compulsion to dominate him, to isolate him from his guardian, from Flora, from Mrs Grose and from the possibility of Quint's lingering.[…] The [final] scene also includes the long-anticipated duel with Quint. The governess has never seemed so confident, so much in control, so that even an adherent to the exclusive truth of the 'first story' must question what the concept of 'possession' really means and who, in this last scene, is 'possessed'.[21]

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[18] *The Turn of the Screw,* act I: scene i.
[19] Ibid.
[20] See Arnold Whittall, "The Chamber Operas" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 105-106.
[21] See Patricia Howard, "The Climax: Act II scene 8, Miles" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten The Turn of the Screw*, ed. by Patricia Howard, p. 92.

In removing the much of the ambiguity concerning the ontological status of the ghosts, the composer and the librettist are enabled to employ the ghostly aspect of James' text as the blueprint for a strongly different treatment. Henry James' novella is a reflection of the Victorian pre-occupation with ghost stories which encapsulate in part the Victorian anxieties about religion and the supernatural. Ghost stories, for the Victorian, are repositories of half-credited folk beliefs about the uncanny and provide an oblique way of exploring socially unacceptable themes. James' description of an earthy ghost is shows a distinct resemblance to M. R. James' *Ghosts Stories of an Antiquary*. The savage ghost in M. R. James' "The Treasure of Abbott Thomas" marks a sharp contrast with the scholarly protagonist, Mr Somerton. The symbolic dichotomy between the protagonist and the ghost which is found in M. R. James' works is also tactically used in the opera to enhance the dramatic presentation. Compared with Miles and Flora, the governess represents mature adulthood; however, the governess' relative innocence and inexperience in the position draws a strong contrast to the depraved experience of Quint and Jessel but it is the attempt on both sides to impose an adult's perspective on these two innocent children which will lead to the death of Miles. Although neither James' original novel nor Piper's libretto mention anything detailed about the relationship between Quint and Miles, there is a strong possibility that the boy had been corrupted by Quint while the former valet was still alive.[22] The governess appears to herself as the embodiment of rational behaviour in contrast to Quint who encapsulates decadence and evil. But in this the governess is the product of her epoch. Although Henry James is on the brink of a new century, he still wants to exploit the Victorian spiritualist ethos – although very much to his own ends.

One of James' primary motives in the creation of a ghost story is the exploration of the obscurities and problems of narrative authority. As the main content of the story is the governess' sole account of her freakish and tragic experience at Bly, the genesis of the narrative already consists of the ambiguities and confusions of memory and trauma. It is James' purpose to make it impossible to detect the actual facts associated with the death of Miles. Furthermore, the narrative in James' text is at least three layers deep. The novella begins with the narrator's account of his recollection of a "gruesome" tale he heard from his friend, Douglas.

[22] See Wilfrid Mellers, "Turning the Screw" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer, p.144-

Although Douglas eventually disclosed the "horrible" story which was recorded by his family's late governess, he is presented as being still distressed and haunted by it. Written with some sense of yet impressing her employer, the governess' personal account only explains the purpose of her actions and responses at Bly and this leaves a lot to be desired as a factual account of the death of Miles. With these three different narrative views, each layer requires careful examination and assessment. In fact, as the story is designed, the "facts" are so elusive that the reader has little opportunity to know but has to guess the exact occasion to exercise judgement, and when to refrain from judging or simply to accept the indeterminacy.

While James' text is an exercise on narrative authority, in which part of the purpose was to make ambiguous the actual existence of the ghosts, Britten and Piper determined to materialise their entities and feature them as a crucial part in the operatic presentation. In so doing, the composer and the librettist have quite surrendered the novelist's intention to create an ontological mystery within the text. For example, in act I scene viii, Britten and Piper even create lines for Miles and Flora to engage in dialogue with Quint and Jessel quite without the presence of the governess whose status as Edmund Wilson's projector promptly flies out the window. Even though the ghosts are manifested at various levels of visibility throughout the piece, the mere fact of having a bodily presence on the stage has a disambiguating effect on the plot compared to its original. Because of their bodily presence Quint and Jessel function as a dynamic physical force within the entire operatic presentation, even though their altered condition is signalled by an elevated style of language to mark their difference from their still living counterparts.

> MISS JESSELL
> I too must have a soul to share my woe
> Despised, betrayed, unwanted she must go
> Forever to my joyless spirit bound.
> "The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (II, i)

The passage clearly illustrates Miss Jessel's determination to corrupt Flora. What she now desires is the little girl's soul so she will have someone to share her sufferings. The librettist employs this poetic style of language to create a sense of remoteness in Miss Jessel's delivery: as a ghost, she does not speak as an ordinary human being; she and Quint are already liberated from the constraints of social

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convention and expectations. To further mark Quint's supernatural presence, the composer also creates a haunting melismatic singing style and attaches as a signal of presence the sound of the marimba throughout the entire opera. In line with their change of ontological status of Britten and Piper's ghosts, there is a more overt examination of their audience's notion of childhood innocence and adult corruption. This thematic shift is demonstrated through Peter Quint's character:

> QUINT
> I seek a friend,.
> Obedient to follow where I lead,
> Slick as a juggler's mate to catch my thought,
> Proud, curious, agile, he shall feed
> My mounting power. (II, i)

The passage clearly points out the purpose of the reappearance of Quint's ghost. The wicked spirit wants to possess a young soul and be his master. He and Miss Jessel's targets are Miles and Flora. Throughout the opera, Quint and Miss Jessel progressively lure the youngsters to follow their wills, a process which will eventually culminate in the death probably of both. But having become for the literal purposes of the opera, real ghosts, they are quickly moved into the symbolic.

By placing the ghosts on stage as explicit symbols, Britten and Piper are able to explore certain areas of consciousness and behaviour, such as homosexuality and paedophilia, that are not easily available in a conventional realist narrative or because of social or moral constraints "Quint was much too free" as Mrs Grose says. The deceased's personality has been transformed into a cunning and secretive desire.

> QUINT
> I am the smooth world's double face,
> Mercury's heels feathered with mischief and god's deceit.
> The brittle blandishment of counterfeit.
> In me secrets, half-formed desires meet. (I, viii)

The passage clearly underlines Quint's corruptive and deceitful nature. Furthermore, Quint's "secretive desire" is associated with his sexual behaviours and is the source that corrupts the innocent boy. In using the old convention of a ghost story, Britten and Piper are thereby given license to discuss sensitive issues which cannot be raised openly in the circumstances either of the original story or of the opera.

Britten and Piper's portrayal of Quint still echoes much in James' original. The character is more than doubly an outsider. In James' text, Quint has red hair which strongly marks him as diabolical and even quite possibly Irish. His social standing is poor. Furthermore, Quint, according to the governess, is not a gentleman; he has suspect relations with the women around him. He, according to Mrs Grose, also steals clothes from his master and is a drunkard. All these incriminating characteristics of Quint have been preserved in the opera and are dramatically used as the corruptive source which leads to the death of Miles.

This comes about, partially as the result of his inability to understand or cope with the competing demands of an adult world and partially because the children have been corrupted by Quint and Jessel. Although the level of corruption is different between Quint and Miles because of the boy's age, it is nevertheless serious enough to get him expelled from school. The governess in the opera on the other hand, tries to act as a counter-force against the two ghosts. However, her inexperience in dealing with her pupils and her increasingly neurotic behaviour has seriously impeded her sense of what is reasonable. As the governess begins to treat Miles "as an intelligent equal" as she puts it in James' text, the little boy has little chance of surviving the competing demands of an adult world which he has neither the physical nor mental capacity to understand or cope with.

Through the characterisation of the protagonists, Britten and Piper's adaptation shifts the reading away from the Victorians' anxiety about the supernatural towards a more knowing and darker perspective. It is by the very fact that she is doing her best to save these children that the governess accidentally destroys the innocent Miles. As much as the ghosts themselves, she has lost sight of the frailty of innocence.

The themes of innocence and isolation connects both *Billy Budd* and *The Turn of the Screw*. In *Billy Budd*, the story is set at sea on a naval vessel which is constantly on alert for any sign of attack from the adversary, France. Based on Herman Melville's last work, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, every character in E. M. Forster and E. Crozier's adaptation is cut off from the land and trapped within the limited space of the ship.[23] Order, obedience and co-operation are essential rules during any period

[23] See Philip Reed, "From first thoughts to first night: a Billy Budd Chronology" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks, Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 42-73.

of war and those in authority cannot afford to allow any sign of disaffection which might initiate mutiny on board. Furthermore, as Mervyn Cooke notes, "Britten must […] have been drawn to the story by its theme of innocence at odds with hostile surroundings, the situation here intensified by the extreme isolation and autonomy of the floating community with which it is concerned. Billy is less unusual than Peter Grimes since he gets on so well with most of his shipmates but he is a further product of Britten's lifelong operatic preoccupation with the corruption of innocence."[24] Furthermore, with everyone trapped within the confines of the warship, Captain Vere as the isolated final authority on board feels he has no option but to execute Billy to forestall any possible breakdown in order.[25] To quote Clifford Hindley's study, "the sense of being on the edge of a mutinous eruption is distinctly more prominent in the opera than in the novel. The famous opening phrase of the music betrays not only Vere's mist of doubt: its oscillation is between the keys of B flat major (which represents salvation) and B minor, the key of mutiny."[26]

Britten, Forster and Crozier adapted, *Billy Budd, Sailor* into music theatre in a style reminiscent of nineteenth century grand opera. It is presented in grand opera scale: a Prologue, an Epilogue and two acts comprising seven scenes, with a total running-time of about two and three-quarter hours. Throughout, the libretto is written in prose which perhaps indicates the librettists' intention to break the barrier between theatrical and colloquial language. However, the low level of diction automatically invites the audience to associate the opera with a late nineteenth-century *verismo* style of music theatre which is far from Melville's original high-flown and portentous manner. Structurally, the first scene is particularly busy: it establishes the situation and briskly introduces all the main characters – Vere we have already met in the Prologue. Thereafter, apart from some below-decks heartiness, the action settles to its main purpose: tracing the claustrophobic interactions of the three main characters, Billy, Vere and Claggart.

Billy is not only the embodiment of physical handsomeness but also the incarnation of innocent virtue, shedding sweetness and light where-ever he goes. Vere, on the other hand, is a softened, more human version of Melville's original, less

[24] Mervyn Cooke, "Britten's Billy Budd: Melville as opera libretto" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks, Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed, p. 28.
[25] See Philip Brett, "Salvation at Sea: *Billy Budd*" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. by Christopher Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) p. 133-143.
[26] Clifford Hindley, "Eros in life and death: *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*" in *The Cambridge*

obviously aristocratic and aloof. Claggart, of course, is a brutal villain, filled with inscrutable and agonised venom.

Melville's intention in writing *Billy Budd* seems to have been to create a story about the world as a theatre for the implacable combat between good and evil in which the failure of human society and the inscrutable horror of a universe that cares nothing for human aspiration must lead to an inevitably tragic conclusion. There is a dark suspicion that any God that exists either cares little for human kind or is actually malevolent. Figures in the narrative move in a world dense with symbols and loaded with mythological significance. Social and political events share in this signifying activity. The novelist strategically places the events in the twin contexts of the war abroad with Revolutionary France and mutiny and unrest at home in the form of the Nore and Spithead mutinies. This evokes a number of intriguing paradoxes which are embedded in the basic fabric of the story. A prime example is that while France at the time was the symbol of liberty and the overthrow of an old corrupt order, its emancipation had gradually come to threaten the political stability throughout Europe as the cause of freedom had quickly lurched into a new form of tyranny. And conversely, the forces of reaction had become the guarantors of a more traditional but still genuine form of freedom. Freedom in terms of *The Rights of Man* had become a dangerous and subversive notion worthy of the attention of the Master-at-Arms.

Much of this disappears from Forster and Crozier's work. The little incident of "farewell, old *Rights o' Man*" remains, but little is made of it. For the rest, all these political subtexts from the novel are suppressed in the opera. The only trace of the external political dimension is to be found in act one scene two when the officers are sitting around drinking wine in Vere's cabin and repeatedly saying "Don't like the French". When the opportunity does arise, the composer and the librettists do not fully develop the chance of combat with the political enemy in act one and have turned it instead into a kind of morale-building exercise for the crew. The atmosphere on board ship, because of the confined space and lack of outside influence, easily becomes analogous to a domestic setting. As a result, there will be a corresponding difficulty in using the *Indomitable* to sustain any larger symbolic roles and the metaphysical dimension, in particular, has quietly slipped overboard. Britten, Forster and Crozier's collaboration consistently emphasises more personal, emotional level

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Companion to Benjamin Britten, ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 148.

than that of either the political or the metaphysical which are so central to Melville's original.

Opera is not a perfect medium for presenting abstract reasoning, as the words are so easily subordinated to the music. However, by channelling the plot into mythic narrative, music theatre still can embrace larger schemes of argument that do admit of abstractions such as metaphysics. Myth aims to function within the manipulation of large symbolic gestures and refers them to a source of causality and meaning outside accustomed norms and rationalities. Thus, mythic narrative readily makes itself available for more general considerations, in themes such as the justice or anger of the gods, the mystery of the gods' cruelty or indifference, the immense mystery of evil. Values in mythic narrative can still have personal or societal reference but the location of significant causality is frequently outside rational appropriation, and can easily make them seem epiphenomenal. Britten, Forster and Crozier's artistic decision to keep the interaction between the characters at a personal level is their method of transforming the original novel into a piece of music theatre.

In order to make concrete some analogue of Melville's metaphor for the battle between good and evil, the composer and the librettists focus solely on the human and personal level of the story. As a result, the metaphysical and moral discourses which are featured so prominently as the main theme in the original text are almost completely lost. A striking example is to be found in Billy's trial scene in which Vere is questioned before the drum-head court to give witness and provide arguments for the verdict. In Melville's text the novelist provides for the Captain a long carefully reasoned and impassioned speech about the necessity of maintaining discipline even in a case which verges on being unjust to the defendant. With the officers of the court martial looking for a way of clemency for Billy Budd, Vere's speech is the key moment that determines Billy's ultimate sentence. In the opera, however, the entire speech is omitted and replaced with a mysterious silence which causes a great degree of puzzlement among the officers and raises insistent questions about Vere's possible motivation. Without the guidance of the Captain, the court-martial has no alternative but to condemn Billy to death but in the meantime the elaborate metaphysics and moral speculations have been deflected into the personal question of "Why did he do that?".

Vere's very different reactions amplify the contrasting thematic presentations between the novel and the opera. With such a blueprint in mind, Vere's speech in the

trial, in condemning Billy, is the response of an upright individual to an impossible situation. It is a reflection on the moral character of society and the universe as a whole that the captain is forced into the position of perpetrating a terrible wrong by his very ability to see more than one side of a question.

By forcing Vere to be silent in this crucial scene, the work makes his character more opaque especially at the point where clarity is most desired. Furthermore, this speechlessness, denies any more discursive examination of the larger scheme of references which form a prominent part of Melville's text. Vere's silent response reveals the composer and the librettists' intention to distance their opera away from the original's grand mythic narrative towards a more domestic though still symbolic discourse. In this light Captain Vere's attachment to Billy moves into the more central but ambiguous territory than that of his disinterested fondness for the young hero. In the epilogue of the opera, the captain deeply regrets his inability to save Billy.

> VERE
> For I could have saved him, I could have saved him. He knew it, even his shipmates knew it, though earthly laws silenced them.
> Oh, What have I done? But he has saved me, and blessed me, and the love that passes understanding has come to me.[27]

"Love", it should be noted, not "peace": Captain Vere's internal struggle and the inability to redeem the young sailor from the unjust ordeal, leave him with a mental scar for the rest of his life. While his profound laments are revealed by the words "saved", "knew" and "silence", Vere also gains emotional strength and feels himself "blessed" by having known the young Billy. The nature of that blessing remains unstated.

This is not the only interesting aspect of the Epilogue. While Billy's presence on the ship is directly in some ways symbolically associated with the conflict of good and evil among his comrades, the character who eventually has to endure the intense ordeal of the young sailor's fate is Captain Vere.[28] The captain's very different reactions during Billy's trial as presented in the novel and opera respectively were been discussed above in terms of the contrasting thematic presentations in each. The placing the captain centre stage in the opera and surviving the war in a way denied him in the novel, can be regarded as the librettist and the composer's artistic response

[27] *Billy Budd*, Epilogue.
[28] See Philip Reed, "The 1960 revisions: two-act *Billy Budd*" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks:*

towards the compositional requirements of music theatre, in which the dramatic intensity and the psychological struggle of characters has to be the core of the piece. To quote Cooke's study, "in order to establish Vere as the central character, he is made to appear in the Prologue and Epilogue which frame the action. These reminiscences of the ageing captain are the librettists' invention since Meville kills Vere off in action relatively soon after Billy's execution. In addition to placing Vere at the centre of the tragedy, they also promote the interpretation of the story as a parable of redemption."[29] The captain's achievement of calm after a long-lasting internal turmoil can thus be paradoxically associated with his reluctant decision to send Billy Budd to his death. Vere's muted response and subsequent sense of redemption indicate that Britten, Forster and Crozier's sought a quite different interpretation from the original's mythic narrative import concerning the failure of reason.

Because of the libretto's downgrading of the metaphysical and the political aspects of the novel there is a danger that there will be problems for the characterisation of Billy Budd and John Claggart. This is exacerbated by the fact that Billy in both versions has virtually no character to speak of. However, in Melville's text, as a psychologically under-developed character, Billy has room to accommodate various symbolic or allegorical features which enable the young sailor to be fitted into his mythic role. As the novelist writes, "Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company." The biblical references which underpin Billy's characterisation transform the seemingly monotonous character into a symbol of goodness, handsomeness, purity and naivety. While Billy's bland nature in the original can still allow him to function as a mythical character, such a flat characterisation does not work so well in an opera pitched at a more personal level. Immediately Claggart sets his eyes on his victim when the young hero is introduced to him he calls Billy "a find in a thousand, […] a beauty, a jewel. The pearl of great price."[30] The quotation is ominous and Claggart soon enough reveals his determination to destroy Billy Budd in the last scene of the first act:

Benjamin Britten Billy Budd, ed. by Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed, p. 74-84.

[29] See Mervyn Cooke, "Britten's Billy Budd: Melville as opera libretto" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks, Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed, p. 28.

> Oh, beauty, oh handsomeness, goodness! Would that I never encountered you! Would that I lived in my own world always, in that depravity to which I was born. There I found peace of sort, there I established an order such as reigns in hell. […] I am doomed to annihilate you.[31]

The passage clearly trying to say something about Claggart's character and his attitude towards Billy (of which more below). But at the personal level, being only "Handsome" and "Good" does not constitute enough of a portrayal for Billy to be featured strongly in a theatrical presentation. As a result, the protagonist's unthinking goodness is not just implausible but actually makes him appear to be virtually an idiot. At the end of act one scene one of the opera when Billy inquires of his mates as to the character of the captain and Vere is given a good report, the protagonist begins to rave that he would happily die for "Starry Vere". "I'd die to save you, ask for to die", says Billy. The text points out a blunt irony in that Billy does indeed eventually die for Vere, although not in circumstances that he might have hoped for. But this outburst is distinctly odd. This is almost Billy as a faithful spaniel. By diluting the protagonist's symbolic and mythic qualities of character without adding very much to compensate, the librettists' portrayal of Billy tends lose focus and in fact makes his behaviour very difficult to understand – except, perhaps at the end where a sharper picture emerges. But meanwhile, the representation of Billy Budd in the opera corresponds with Britten's lifelong obsession with capturing the perils of innocence and the plight of the outsider. Although Billy feels at home on his mess-deck, there is no doubt that he is strikingly different from the rest of his mates. Billy's innocence and beauty immediately set him apart, as Claggart recognises in this first encounter.

Claggart's character has allied though different problems. His first soliloquy reveals that his evil purpose is to destroy Billy Budd and this plunges the action directly into the intensities of the dramatic situation.

> CLAGGART
>
> I am doomed to annihilate you, I am vowed to your destruction. I will wipe you off the face of the earth, off this tiny floating fragment of earth, off this ship where fortune has left you.[32]

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[30] Benjamin Britten, E. M. Forster and E. Crozier, *Billy Budd*, act I: scene i.
[31] *Billy Budd*, act I, scene iii.
[32] See Billy Budd, Act I, scene iii.

Claggart's soliloquy bears a strong resemblance to Iago's first declamatory aria in Verdi and Boito's *Otello*. Forster and Crozier are concentrating on the darkness and destructive side of the character but do not involve themselves with exploring the actual motivation for such an act. Although the opera is echoing the original text in depicting the Master-at-Arms as a force of evil, there is still, even more than there is for Iago, a mystery at the heart of his personality. In the novel Melville describes Claggart as "a depravity according to Nature", but the novelist never gives an explicit explanation of the significance of this description. This depiction of Claggart's character as "a depravity to Nature" works well enough in the metaphysical and theological context of Melville's text because the terms of reference are fundamentally supra-personal. In his account, the personal details of the three main characters are subsumed under an abstract consideration. Thus, in the novel, Claggart becomes a surrogate for the forces of evil; Billy bears a resemblance to prelapsarian Adamic goodness, and Vere symbolises the failures of rational compromise. In the opera, because the original's mythic framework is missing, the account of Claggart's impulsive and superficial act of destruction cannot be directed to the consequences of the universe's carelessness or malice; his actions are purely for stage effect and signal to the audience that this character simply belongs to the evil side of things.

The constant repetition of the first person pronoun in the first speech above, not only underlines the contrast in Claggart's egocentric character but also acts as an amplifier to the audience which channels the character's determination to eliminate Billy. In order to accentuate the crucial element in the drama, librettists have to amplify the key passages and draw a convincing picture even if that picture is in many ways quite unrealistic. The libretto, it would seem, not only has the responsibility of narrating a story but also has to skilfully amplify the emotion of dramatic situations. This means that in *Billy Budd*, apart from the general necessity of being musically expressive, the libretto needs to intensify scenes for dramatic purposes if the opera is to capture the emotional charge characteristic of music theatre.[33]

Although Claggart's plan to destroy Billy is carefully constructed, the falseness of his accusation against the young hero is still easily detected by Captain Vere. However, Billy's inexperience and ignorance of the way to handle the

[33] See Peter Kivy, *Osmin's Rage: Philosophical reflections on Opera, Drama, and Text* (London:

accusations help to fulfil Claggart's evil scheme. In Billy's final aria, the young protagonist pours out his emotion before his execution:

> Look! Through the port comes the moon-shine astray!
> It tips the guard's cutlass and silvers this nook;
> But 'twill die in the dawning of Billy's last day.
> Ay, ay, all is up; and I must up too,
> Early in the morning, a-loft from below.
> On an empty stomach, now, never would it do.
> They'll give me a nibble- bit of biscuit ere I go.
> Sure, a messmate will reach me the last parting cup;
> But turning heads away from the hoist and belay [34]

The aria is addressed to Billy's shipmate, Dansker, who is bringing the young sailor his final meal before the dawn execution. Billy's words literally express the sorrow of his terrible destiny. As he looks at the silvery moonlight which reflects from the guard's cutlass, Billy realises the chilling fact that his death sentence is drawing near. As in most of Britten's operas, the destruction of the innocent is once again the central theme in *Bill Budd*, although in this case it will have the extra twist that innocence and beauty destroy Vere and Claggart as well.

One further point needs to be made. It has been argued that in discarding much of Melville's metaphysical theme in structuring the opera, Forster and Crozier have, in true nineteenth century fashion moved the action into a form of domestic drama. The interactions between Vere and Claggart in the end of act two scene one reveals this quasi-domestic dispute.

> CLAGGART
> Ah, pleasant looks, good temper – they are but a mask. He is deep, deep.
> VERE
> Master-at-Arms, I cannot agree, Nay, nay.
> CLAGGART
> You do but note his outwards, the flower of masculine beauty and strength.
> VERE
> I have seen many men in my time, and I trust him.
> CLAGGART
> A man-trap lurks under those ruddy-tipped daisies.

Cornell University Press, 1999) p. 252-255.
[34] *Billy Budd*, Act II scene iii.

VERE

Claggart! Take heed what you say. There's a yard-arm for a false witness. (II, i)

Such passionate exchange indicates the two characters' strong reactions towards the young sailor. However, from a realistic point of view, the story is set in the late eighteenth century, in a time of war and they have just been chasing an enemy ship. It is implausible that a captain would become involved in a bitter argument with such a low ranking officer as a Master-at-Arms, especially when he is portrayed as being a pedantic aristocratic and reserved character. The quarrel also hints that there is a level of emotional engagement on Vere's part which is simply inappropriate to the situation; yet at Billy's final trial before his fellow-officers, he does not offer even a calm and measured response and remains silent. Such a portrayal in the libretto has the unsettling effect that not only are the main issues are being tuned at a personal, less metaphysical level than in the original novel but that instead of a grand scheme, the spectators are propelled to witness a domestic drama or even to use something like queer theory to rationalise their actions. The use of the prologue and epilogue underlines that the opera is working on a much more personal level than in the original. In that use of prologue and epilogue the spectators soon realise that the death of Billy Budd was the most traumatic experience in Vere's life, it has had an effect that lasted many years. In the opera, therefore, the plot is concentrated more on an intimate level of reference than on using this private remorse as the symbol of the conflict between good and evil. The opera illustrates an aspect of the term "bourgeois fiction" in which all other values are derived from a personal perspective, and one in which it becomes the exclusive source of moral standards. As a result, in the opera, Claggart cannot be a surrogate for the forces of evil because he only represents himself and his personal motivation becomes crucial at the explanatory level of the plot. And a consequence of this method of adaptation is that it becomes only natural to speculate about the main characters' sexuality as the librettists and the composer have left very few other terms of description available to the audience.

Problems of description and explanation are not confined to *Billy Budd*. Although *The Turn of the Screw* and *Death in Venice* are both works by Britten and Piper, the narrative style could not be more different. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the opera is constructed with a linear plot with consequential outcomes in which one scene is hanging from another in conventional narrative fashion and the music shows a strong developmental impulse that goes along with the narrative and exposition.

Death in Venice, on the other hand, is more like a series of tableaux, with the scenes forming a progression that is only partly narrative. Instead of using the novella's third person narrative to convey Aschenbach's existential crisis, Piper has the protagonist tell his own story. In most parts of *Death in Venice*, everything is seen from within and with reference to von Aschenbach's consciousness. Indeed, the character is hardly ever off the stage even during the long scene of the pentathlon on the beach at the end of the first act where the musical burden is being carried by the chorus. This narrative device is augmented by the decision to have a single singer rotating through a succession of subsidiary roles but with the overall function of being the messenger of Death. The symbolic aspect of this role is an echo of Mann's original in which the description of the traveller at the beginning of the novella and the mysterious gondolier are each associated with images of death. The protagonist's encounter of the traveller (in a graveyard) in the original is intended to evoke the image of Hermes, the god of travellers and the escort of the dead.

> There was something hypnotic and distracting about the smooth facility of his movements and the glib empty talk with which he accompanied them, almost as if he were anxious that the traveller might have second thoughts about his decision to go to Venice.[35]

In the opera the symbolism of the supporting characters is readily assimilated into the functioning of the piece, even though the entire work presents itself as a quasi-literal account of the deterioration of von Aschenbach's physical and mental condition. The libretto not only reflects the original's preoccupation with the integration of mythology into the mundane but also further increases the weight of reference and the use of classical mythology. In von Aschenbach's climatic dream for example, where Mann gives his readers a long description of the maenads and "Der fremde Gott", the opera presents an overt debate between Apollo and Dionysus and an ensuing dance. In this way, the mythology is made to operate explicitly in the opera and the audience is never in any doubt as to the dream's status. Since so much of the action takes place inside von Aschenbach's head, the decision to place the gods and their followers on stage do not cause confusion but simply the effect of making the symbolic more actual and concrete. The traveller in the beginning of the opera has portentously symbolic overtones, but when the same singer reappears as the gondolier, the Fop and

[35] See Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. by David Luke (London: Vintage, 1998),p.210

other characters throughout the piece, the audience will immediately realise the underlining significance of the theatrical device. This mythological framework in both the novella and the opera is, of course, in distinct contrast with the ancient Greek's understanding of their mythology. The mythology in the novella and the opera is seen as an extension of personal consciousness; that is, there is an implicit theory that the mythological structures gain their validity from their relation to and reflection of psychological states. Ancient Greek culture, on the other hand, saw mythology as a narrative about aspects of society embedded in and responding to Nature, rather than in the modern conception of the psychological state and make-up of the individual.

The explicitness of the use of Greek mythology in *Death in Venice* has another function related to the employment of motifs in the opera which revolve around the organising themes of travel, doublings, homosexuality and illness. Each of these motifs can be symbolic as well as real, as they are in Mann's original where they slide in and out of focus in the realm between the actual and the symbolic. This deliberate uncertainty of focus is part of the novelist's general ironic stance concerning his narrative which for the most part of the novel is carefully non-committal - until the very end of the story, when von Aschenbach does in fact die while hallucinating his intimate moment with Tadziù. In this perspective, the plague is both a real cholera and a symbol of decadence; in concrete terms, von Aschenbach does not, of course, die of decadence but very certainly of cholera. He does, however, catch the cholera, in large part, as a result of his descent into decadence.

In Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, the very reason for Gustav von Aschenbach's journey to Venice is to regain his creativity; however, the journey has gradually exposed the protagonist's unbalanced obsession with beauty which, for him, is now found principally in the human form.[36] The Polish boy, Tadziù, whom Aschenbach accidentally encounters during his self-regenerating journey, tragically becomes the instrument which leads to his humiliation and finally, his death. The Adriatic Sea, in both the original text and Piper's adaptation express the duality of the theme in the opera.[37] For the protagonist, the sea is supposed to rejuvenate his ailing creative inspiration; however, it is this very element that contributes to his ultimate

[36] See Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 523-547.
[37] See Christopher Palmer, "Benjamin Britten: Death in Venice" in the booklet for the opera recording, Decca 425 669-2, p. 10-17.

death from cholera. In act one scene five of the libretto the protagonist says, "I'll stay, I cannot leave. / What can be better than the sea? / What can be better than this? / Ah, how peaceful to contemplate the sea – immeasurable, unorganised, void. I long to find rest in perfection, and is not this a form of perfection?"[38] Venice, the city, also further recapitulates the opera's dramatic theme in associating the alluring force of the sea and the artificial elegance of the deathless and death-dealing city.

As Aschenbach indulges his senses in admiration of the beautiful Tadziù while battling to retain his self-discipline, he is consciously exposing and surrendering himself to the advancing cholera epidemic. This self-destructive behaviour highlights the sacrificial tone which is features prominently in the piece: sacrifice for art, sacrifice for beauty elide gently into final sacrifice to appease "Der fremde Gott". The fact is that the protagonist's repeated inability to speak to Tadziù is not so much an act of artistic delicacy and restraint as a refusal to accept his own sexuality and this self-abnegation will ultimately destroy him. Furthermore, even though von Aschenbach's Apollonian dedication to art is represented in the opera as genuine, it is still incomplete because one-sided. And it is this incompleteness which has resulted in the his writer's block. In *Death in Venice*, Britten and Piper argue that for Aschenbach to be complete both as man and artist he has to acknowledge his instinctual side – even if this involves acknowledgement of his homosexuality and his attraction to boys. Unless he fully accepts this side of his personality, von Aschenbach will never recover from his crisis and this failure will be deadly. To encompass the difficulties of this exposition, Britten develops a freely declamatory vocal line, with pitch notations but no rhythmic markings. In addition, Aschenbach's isolation is emphasised by scoring his introspective moment with piano punctuation; the result is the most desolate, the driest of recitatives.[39] In order to find an operatic equivalent of the dense and allusive description of the original, Britten and Piper worked closely together to create a set of literary motifs, such as "the Beach", "the plague" and "Tadziù", interweaving these with the musical expression. Furthermore, they allowed an unusual degree of stylistic dependence on recitative to re-create Aschenbach's meditations throughout the course of the opera. This ruminative recitative is needed in order to capture the extreme interiority of von Aschenbach's personality. When thinking to himself von Aschenbach is given this unmeasured

[38] Benjamin and Myfanwy Piper, *Death in Venice*: act I, scene v.

notation, with only pitch indication, that allow a meditative *parlando* manner to form the basic fabric of the recitative.

In order to transform Thomas Mann's expressionist novella into music drama, Piper and Britten decided to place the emphasis directly on the protagonist's psychological development.[40] In this process, the strong philosophical and musical references can find appropriate analogues in dramatic terms. To quote Schmidgall's study, "though, it should be noted that the structure of the opera – rapid changes of venues, seventeen brief scenes, and extremely short, through-composed musical intervals-is still essentially cinematic. Rather, Britten was obliged to re-create *Der Tod in Venedig* from the inside out, focusing as in the original upon the inner tragedy of Aschenbach."[41] The dramatic intensity is faithfully preserved through the depiction of the protagonist's lonely internal struggle and failure. In the opening of the novella Mann had suggested that the real von Aschenbach is in fact just a façade covering emptiness. The novelist hints such an assessment in his depiction of the surroundings as the protagonist waits for the tram back to the city.

> Its façade, adorned with Greek crosses and brightly painted hieratic motifs, is also incribed with symmetrically arranged texts in gilt lettering, selected scriptural passages about the life to come, such as: 'They shall go into the dwelling place of the Lord', or 'May the Light perpetual shine upon them'.

Which later in Venice becomes:

> On the steps of the well in its centre he sank down and leaned his head against the stone rim, The place was silent, grass grew between the cobblestones, garbage was lying about. Among the delapidated houses of uneven height all round him was on that looked like a palazzo, with Gothic windows that now had nothing behind them, and little lion balconies.

Again, in the novella, when von Aschenbach dreams of Dionysus there is no struggle with Apollo who on the contrary has a strong presence in the operatic adaptation. It is as if Mann's protagonist already shows the signs of being swayed by the raging Dionysus before he even embarks upon his fatal journey across the Alps. The Apollonian elements of von Aschenbach's personality are a hoax: not only is his aristocratic title recently acquired but also he is a Northerner living in Munich. The

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[39] Gary Schmidgall, *Literature As Opera*, p. 346.
[40] See Myfanwy Piper, "The Libretto" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten Death in Venice*, ed. by Donald Mitchell, p. 45-54.
[41] Gary Schmidgall, *Literature As Opera*, p. 326.

character of a seemingly self-disciplined master writer is nothing but a mask. By the end of the novella, Mann's attitude towards von Aschenbach has begun to harden; the protagonist eventually is consumed by his undisciplined desire.

In Britten and Piper's *Death in Venice*, because the opera cannot have the meditative, ironic voice of the narrator as in the original, the librettist heavily adopts recitative for structuring the protagonist's self-reflecting soliloquies. But the exclusive point of view of Aschenbach, while being the musical centre, is by itself not a sufficient alternative because it lacks the governing irony. So irony is imported by the multiplication of reactions to Aschenbach from the roles such as the Traveller and the Fop until finally the issue of artistic balance is made explicit in the nightmare dialogue of Apollo and Dionysus. Piper establishes the hero's apparent dilemma in the first scene of the opera. The phrase, "my mind beats on", is repeated four times throughout Aschenbach's opening aria and lays a structural framework, for both his mental state and the working of the aria. The protagonist's agitated spirit pulses like music, and it urges him to seek a solution to regain inner calm and creative inspiration. The aria can be divided into four sections, in which the protagonist initiates with the struggle to balance between the optimistic and pessimistic aspects of his life. In the first section, Aschenbach opens with a depressed tone:

> My mind beats on
> and no words come. […]
> I, Aschenbach,
> famous as a master-writer,
> successful, honoured,
> self-discipline my strength […]
> why am I now at a loss?
> I reject the words
> called forth by passion,
> I suspect the easy judgement of the heart –
> now passion itself has left me
> and delight in fastidious choice.[42]

Yet, as his heart beats on, the protagonist is falling deeper into the abyss. His passion for life and work has evaporated. He tries to regain his composure and mental order by reminding himself of his glorious past but sadly Aschenbach's optimistic impulse

[42] See *Death in Venice*, Act I, scene i.

eludes him. Finally, the aria concludes with a vivid image of death even as the protagonist tries to plead with Nature for spiritual renewal: "O tender leaves and tardy spring, refresh me!" Piper begins the work as she means to go on: with an aria that not only highlights the protagonist's desperate hope for renewal but also pinpoints the important culminating motif of death. Indeed, as Aschenbach ends his opening aria with "How solitary it is here - / the silent graveyard, / and the silent dead", the messenger of Hermes enters as if from the "black hole in the ground" with tales of the South. Black is also used to support the theme of the piece and in fact becomes one of the core metaphors of the opera in which the protagonist is surrounded by the image – the graveyard in Munich, narrow canals in Venice, cholera and even Venice itself will be read as representations of blackness which beside its association with death comes to symbolise his decadent tendencies.[43] Although death over-shadows the hero, as the libretto indicates in Aschenbach's first aria, he is still eager to regain his essence of life which is to create and to write. Thus he takes the journey to the southern country.

It is there that his quest for self renewal directly leads to his encounter with the beautiful Tadziù. The protagonist is convinced that by observing the embodiment of beauty, he can regain his lost creativity.[44] In section four of Mann's text, the protagonist's inner thoughts constantly associate his ardent admiration of Tadziù with his ultimate worship of the conceptual idea of beauty.

> A mirror and sculptured image! His eyes embraced that noble figure at the blue water's edge, and in rising ecstasy he felt he was gazing on Beauty itself, on Form as a thought of God, on the one and pure perfection that dwells in the spirit and of which a human similitude and likeness had here been lightly and graciously set up for him to worship.[45]

Tadziù has been transformed into a symbolic figure who is acting like a priest for Aschenbach to communicate with his god of beauty. To quote David Luke's study, "the chief visible yet enigmatic, real yet symbolic element is of course Tadziù himself. He is the meeting point of the Apolline cult of disciplined sculptured beauty and the dark destructive longing of Eros-Dionysus. He is presented with extraordinary

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[43] See Donald Mitchell, "Death in Venice: The Dark Side of Perfection" in *The Britten Companion*, ed, by Christopher Palmer, p. 244-246.
[44] See Donald Mitchell, "*Death in Venice*: The Dark Side of Perfection" in *The Britten Companion,* ed. by Christopher Palmer, p. 240-241.
[45] See Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice & Other Stories*, trans. by David Luke, p. 237.

subtlety, mysteriously yet very realistically poised somewhere between innocence and certain half-conscious sensuous coquetry."[46]

The repetition of the word "my beauty", sung by the chorus of youths in act one scene two, initially underlines this theme of male beauty which is now being moved centre-stage to replace the high-flown notions of creativity and artistic discipline. The opera eventually reaches a preliminary climax just before the end of the first act as Aschenbach accepts that he is actually in love with Tadziù, and the protagonist's dormant homosexuality has finally emerged from its repression. For Aschenbach, Tadziù initially seems to him the embodiment of his aesthetic concept of beauty and the "master writer" is astonished when he first sees the boy: "how does such beauty come about? What mysterious harmony between the individual and the universal law produces such perfection of form?"[47] Piper's words indicate the character's profound and ambiguous adoration of the boy just as in Mann's novella. At this stage, the protagonist thinks of himself as simply appreciating Tadziù's unique beauty and attempting to incorporate this living "art form" into his literary creation. However, this artistic detachment soon mutates into a strong passion towards Tadziù, as Mann's subtle description indicates:

> Sometimes, he straightened himself, stretching his chest […] but sometimes, too, and the older man noticed it with a mind-dizzying sense of triumph as well as with terror, he would turn his head hesitantly and cautiously […] and look over his left shoulder to where his lover was sitting. Their eyes did not meet, for an ignominious apprehension was forcing the stricken man to keep his looks anxiously in check.[48]

The protagonist's initial hesitation and extreme caution in observing Tadziù has gradually became a dominating obsession. As a result, in order to approach this embodiment of ultimate beauty, von Aschenbach gradually surrenders his self-discipline to his subconscious indulgence.[49]

In *Death in Venice*, the direct use of Greek mythology has another function which relates to the use of motifs and that, in the operatic collaboration unites the

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[46] See Ibid, p. xxxvii.
[47] *Death in Venice*, act I: scene 4.
[48] See Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. by David Luke (London: Vintage, 1998) p. 252.
[49] See Donald Michell, "Death in Venice: The dark side of perfection" in *The Britten Companion* ed. by Christopher Palmer, p. 244-246.

travel, homosexuality, doublings and illness themes under another powerful opposition and pairing. The struggle between Apollonian doctrines of "love beauty, reason, form" and the Dionysian concept of self-abandonment and passion reflects Aschenbach's inner struggles between his passionate love for and his pure admiration of Tadziù:

> DIONYSUS
> Receive the stranger god.
> APOLLO
> No! Reject the abyss.
> DIONYSUS
> Do not turn away from life.
> APOLLO
> No! Abjure the knowledge that forgives.
> DIONYSUS
> Do not refuse the mysteries.[50]

Apollo's final line in the passage perhaps carries a reference to act five, scene one, of *The Tempest*: "but this rough magic / I here abjure".[51] Like Prospero who eventually renounces his "rough magic", Apollo urges Aschenbach to resist Dionysian temptation and regain his composure. But it is this denial that has led him to this place. The hero instead submits himself to the indulgence of Dionysian principals for his unquenched passion for Tadziù; in so doing Aschenbach finally abandons his self-disciplined character and is torn apart by the terrible inner forces he has so long denied.[52] The sacrifice of beauty is complete.[53]

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Even though the composer is responsible for the final presentation of an operatic piece, the librettist still plays an essential role, especially at the initial stage of an adaptation. A librettist has to approach a literary work in an "operatic" manner – filtering out the discursive and complex descriptions in a literary work while faithfully

[50] See *Death in Venice*, act II, scene xiii.
[51] See *The Tempest*, Act V scene i, line 50-51.
[52] See Eric Roseberry, "Tonal ambiguity in *Death in Venice*: a symphonic view" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten Death in Venice,* ed. by Donald Mitchell, p. 95.
[53] See Clifford Hindley, "Eros in life and death: *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 156-157.

retaining the basic plot and themes.[54] In order to achieve a properly expressive narrative in the music theatre librettists will often create roles that seem exaggerated and extreme, frequently through the use of clichés of character or situation. It may also be necessary to intensify the story line with the depiction of remarkable physical actions and over-intense human passions. In *Billy Budd*, for example, Claggart's evil nature is just sketched in and the librettists do not show any intention to explain details of the character's motivation. The power of the role resides in intensity of situation and gesture.

In *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, the term opera "signifies a drama in which the actors and actresses sing throughout."[55] This sung-through theatrical representation requires a unique literary style in which the text not only enables the performers to act but also accommodates the articulated musical freedom for composers. Furthermore, the theatrical exaggerations are crucial elements in the operatic representation. In an ordinary spoken drama, a performer is only required to speak while acting, this being closer to a "realistic" representation of human behaviour but an operatic representation is designed to intensify human emotions and expose them in a specific dramatic moment through different styles of song.[56] As a result, a realistic approach is not normally available and in the depiction of human sentiment, opera magnifies the artistic means of arousing the audience's feelings through its musical declamations.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's letter to Richard Strauss during the creation of *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912) further underlines the requirement of dramatic intensity as well as structure in the genre of music theatre:

> The proper foundation of all drama is action, action which may be thrilling, or like a gentle puppet-show, or may turn upon psychology. In opera it is the music which becomes the vehicle of the action; dramatic action and music are so to speak two streams which mingle and flow on together. In this particular case, however, in the kind of thing we have for once done here, the music actually fails to contribute anything or to play any part in the progress towards the dramatic aim; it is on the contrary a

[54] See Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984) p. 151-156.
[55] Howard Mayer Brown, "Opera, I", *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. By Stanley Sadie, 4 vols (London: Macmillan, 1992) p. 671.

> retarding element. The meagre and rickety action is constantly interrupted by passages of descriptive music and the audience, whose unsophisticated impulse is to get on with the plot, becomes restive and chafes at these retarding moments.[57]

To further interpret Hofmannsthal's reflection: it may be necessary to surrender florid rhetoric in exchange for direct dramatic actions in music theatre. As a result, a librettist is expected to compose a drama which addresses the importance of physical and psychological actions, rather than the heavily discursive passages.[58] The condensed form of writing is an essential component in composing a libretto. The words are intended to be accompanied by the music and interpreted via the singer's physical expressions.[59] Through this abbreviated form of writing, the audience is given a set of strong signals intended to make the plot more straightforwardly comprehensible and the emotional responses forceful by the use of dramatic situations and outpourings more intensified in scope and expression.[60]

In order to elevate the audience onto high plane of dramatic response, the creation of a strong protagonist is essential. By the construction of a vehement character, the audiences may be more easily drawn into the plot and its stylised situations. Furthermore, composers also need these vivid characters to anchor their dramatic musical expression. Schmidgall comments: "we seek passion in the theatre especially. Hamlet even defines the theatrical experience as a 'dream of passion'. And passion is at the heart of opera."[61] W. H. Auden notes the importance of the passionate characters in the creation of operas:

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[56] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary World*, p. 77-78.

[57] The letter is dated 8 July, 1918: "Das wahre Grundelement des Dramas ist Handlung – sie sei fortreißend oder sanft puppenhaft oder mit Psychologie durchwebt. Diesem Element wird, in der Oper, die Musik zum Träger: es mischen sich gleichsam zwei vorwärts – strömende Gewässer: die dramatische Handlung und das Musikelement. Hier, in der von uns einmalig geschaffenen Form, wirkt nun die Musik nicht als ein Mitwirkendes, Mitströmendes zum dramatischen Ziel, sondern als ein Retardierendes. Die dünne und schwächliche Handlung wird beständig von Musikalisch-untermalten Stellen unterbrochen, und der naive Grundsinn des Publikums, der am Faden der Handlung nach vorwärts will, gerät in Widerspruch und Ungeduld gegen dieses Retardierende." See Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss, *Briefwechsel: Gesamtausgabe, im auftrag von Franz und Alice Strauss Herausgegeben von Willi Schuh* (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1965) p. 413; the translation is from Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss, *The Correspondence between Richard Stauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, trans. by Hanns Hammelmann and Ewald Osers (Collins, London, 1961) p. 305.

[58] See John Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc, 1985) p. 99-106.

[59] Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 1-6.

[60] See Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001) p. vii-xvi.

[61] See Gary Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera*, p. 20

> Opera in particular is an imitation of human wilfulness; it is rooted in the fact that we not only have feelings but insist upon having them at whatever cost to ourselves. Opera, therefore, cannot present character in the novelist sense of the word, namely, people who are potentially good and bad, active and passive, for music is immediate actuality and neither potentiality nor passivity can live in its presence. This is something a librettist must never forget. […] The quality common to all great operatic roles, e.g. Don Giovanni, Norma, Lucia, Tristan, Isolde, Brünnhilde, is that each is a passionate and wilful state of being.[62]

Auden's remark distinguishes the characteristic differences between fiction, theatre and opera. Although operatic characters could only exist in the opera house, they always come to life through each individual interpretation when the work is in performance, mediated by the main characters' strong sense of self-determination which is at the heart of any operatic protagonist. Although their wilfulness may ultimately lead them to a tragic death, their heroic or extreme actions have metamorphosed into a momentary emotional ecstasy which transmits a unique electric charge to the audience. Operatic heroes and heroines embody this art form's unique status as an intense manifestation of a social ritual of exchange and communication.

This intensive dramaturgy is present in *Death in Venice*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Billy Budd*. The dramatic intensity in Britten's three adaptations is arguably embodied in the main character of each operatic opus. Throughout each piece, the three protagonists, namely, von Aschenbach, Captain Vere and the Governess are undergoing a serious internal psychological crisis.[63] While von Aschenbach is desperately striving to obtain his ultimate aesthetic model of beauty through the Polish boy, Tadziù, the Governess, on the other hand, is completely obsessed with her adult ethical concepts of good and evil and determined to impose these ideas upon the innocent Miles.[64] In *Billy Budd*, Captain Vere's mental turmoil

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[62] W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (New York: Vintage, 1968) p.470.
[63] See Christopher Palmer, "The Ceremony of Innocence" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. by Christopher Palmer, p. 68-70.
[64] See Philip Reed, "Aschenbach becomes Mahler: Thomas Mann as Film" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten Death in Venice*, ed. by Donald Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 178-183; Wilfrid Mellers, "Turning the Screw" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. by Christopher Palmer, p. 144-152.

is due to his professional duty to maintain justice and discipline against a background of mutiny but it is a duty which strongly conflicts with his personal feelings for the innocent Billy Budd.[65]

Britten's concept of the genre of music theatre is not only encapsulated in his musical textures but is also reflected through his working relationships with his librettists.[66] The goal in operatic composition, for Britten, was to restore the "brilliance", "freedom" and "vitality" in musical settings of the English language.[67] The composer also emphasised the structure of an operatic composition where he endorses, in his somewhat traditionalist view, "the classical practice of separate numbers that crystallise and hold the emotion of a dramatic situation at chosen moments."[68] The composer had nine collaborators throughout his entire career but it was W. H. Auden, Britten's first librettist, who had the strongest influence on the composer's use of words.[69] Although their only stage collaboration, *Paul Bunyan* (1941) was not a cheerful experience for the composer, Britten in fact had benefited from this adventure and soon graduated from librettists' domination for the rest of his distinguished career.[70] All of his future music theatre pieces would be based on his own ideas and he would only seek a collaborator after he had drawn up a blueprint of the proposed project. His librettists were required to follow his outline when producing texts, in other words, the composer possessed the paramountcy throughout the whole collaboration[71]. It comes as no surprise, then, that each of the narrative methods in these three Britten operas presents some (not always) subtle differences from their originals.

A libretto not only requires words to narrate as in all speaking dramas, it is also necessary to create a sonic ambience in order to encourage musical expressiveness. Thus, the language required for writing a libretto is different from

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[65] See Donald Mitchell, "A *Billy Budd* notebook" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten Billy Budd*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed, p. 111-134.
[66] See Ronald Duncan, *Working with Britten: A Personal Memoir* (London: Rebel Press, 1981) p. 53-64.
[67] See Benjamin Britten, "Introduction" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten Peter Grimes*, ed. by Philip Brett, p. 149.
[68] Ibid.
[69] See Donald Mitchell, *Britten & Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000) p. 156-159.
[70] Peter Porter, "Benjamin Britten's Librettos" *Opera Guide: Peter Grimes/Gloriana by Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Nicholas John, (London: John Calder, 1983) p. 8.
[71] Porter reports, "his [Britten's] librettists whether poets, novelists, producers or scholars, tailored their books to his minutely worked-requirements." Ibid, p. 9.

other genres of literary creation.[72] Trowell reports, "it was recognised quite early in the 17th century that the claims of musical form, and the increased difficulty of distinguishing words and retaining them in the mind in a large theatre with the resonant acoustic necessary for music, demanded brevity and simple sentences from the librettist."[73] Composers and librettists will find themselves having no choice but to abbreviate a larger fresco into a diminutive but well-focused format; they also have to retain the original themes transmit them through the magnified dramatic power which music provides. At this point, the clash between words and music begins to emerge; and in order to overcome this artistic impasse, both composers and librettists had to learn to sacrifice some element of their artistic freedom. However, only through sacrifice, as Chabanon suggests, can a successful amalgamation between words and music be achieved.[74]

Within these constraints, the initial assignment for the librettists and the composer arguably would be the transformation of narrative – from a descriptive novel to a visual, theatrical and musical drama. This deliberate process of modification can be found in the refocusing of the narrative structures in the three works focused on in this chapter. Herman Melville and Thomas Mann's novels are written in the third person narrative form while *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James is mostly written in the first person narrative format.[75] The omniscient narrator of Melville and Mann's novels can tell their story in full scale and detail, investigate and depict not only the protagonists' point of view but also the other characters' emotions which the reader is supposed to be able to watch as if at an imaginary play following the direction of the writers who also, as in Mann's text for *Death in Venice*, provide a running commentary.[76] As a result, in transforming Melville and Mann's works, the librettists and the composer are required to centralise the protagonist's point of view in order as part of a narrative strategy which will lead the audience into the re-

[72] See Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.) p. xvii-xxii.
[73] Brain Trowell, "Libretto (ii), I, 3" The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1992) p. 1195.
[74] See Michel de Chabanon, *De la musique considerée en elle-même et dans ses rapports avec la parole, les langues, la poésie, et la theatre*, p.6.
[75] See Myfanwy Piper, "Writing for Britten" in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten,* ed. by David Herbert (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979) p. 8-21.
[76] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion,* p. 132-134; p. 298-300.

imagined themes of the adapted novel.[77]

This centralising process can be seen as the reason why *The Turn of the Screw* and the other Piper adaptation, *Death in Venice*, are also structured upon the protagonist's aria. However, unlike the earlier work which makes use of solo arias to enable the mysterious atmosphere to be preserved, Britten and Piper's final collaboration transforms Mann's objective narrative technique in the novella into an interiorised drama of personal downfall.[78] The highly compact style of "operatic" writing is a basic component of librettist's work. As she remarks, "no words or action are used in isolation; they all have back- and cross-references. Of course this is the essence of the musical score - but that needs direction and underlining from the script […] I had to concentrate upon what was essential in a given situation – and if more seemed essential than I could use in one place it had to be saved for another and that place be made appropriate to receive it."[79]

Music theatre is a Dionysian art form in which the essence of the artistic genre is to exacerbate a dramatic situation in order to achieve the theatrical experience of Dionysian intoxication not only for the performers but also for the audience.[80] Aschenbach's ultimate capitulation to the Dionysian cult is arguably equivalent to a characteristic of the collaborative endeavour involved in the composing of an opus of music theatre in that words may be required to be sacrificed for the sake of musical expression. The on-going debate of the supremacy between words and music is, in fact, an extensional artistic confrontation between two Olympian deities namely, Apollo and Dionysus. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche reflected on the fundamental differences between these two patrons of arts:

> Apollo stands […] as the transfiguring genius of the *principium individuationis*, through whom alone release and redemption in semblance can truly be attained, whereas under the mythical, jubilant shout of Dionysos the spell of individuation is broken, and the path to the Mother of Beings, to the innermost core of things, is laid open. This enormous opposition, which

[77] See Clifford Hindley, "Eros in Life and Death: *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten,* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 147-148; p. 154-156.
[78] See Christopher Palmer, "Towards a Genealogy of *Death in Venice*" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. by Christopher Palmer, p. 256-259.
[79] Myfanwy Piper, "The Libretto" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten Death in Venice*, ed. by Donald Mitchell, p. 49.
[80] See Niall W. Slater, "The Idea of the Actor" in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? : Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*, ed. by John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) p. 387-390.

> opens up as a gaping gulf between plastic, Apolline, art and the Dionysiac art of music […] attributed to music a different character and origin from all other arts, because music is not, as all the others are, a copy of appearances, but a direct copy of the Will itself, so that it represents *the metaphysical in relation to all that is physical in the world*, the thing-in-itself in relation to all appearances.[81]

The requirements for a successful libretto, namely, an intensely dramatic plot, a highly condensed script and the ability to evoke musical expression, are actually the means of achieving the maximum impact of the Dionysian cult of theatrical *jouissance*.[82] However, in order to liberate the Dionysian style of musical *jouissance*, a composer ultimately has to decompose the Apollonian principles of verbal clarity and grammatical order in the libretto. Nietzsche further notes, "here the Dionysiac shows itself, in comparison with the Apolline, to be the eternal and original power of art which summons the entire world of appearances into existence, in the midst of which a new, transfiguring semblance is needed to hold fast within life the animated world of individuation."[83]

Being a priest for the Olympian god, Apollo, the Orphean mythical bard was an incarnation of words and music which together constitute the main substance of music theatre.[84] While his tragic death under the hands of the Thracian women, disciples of Dionysus, is literally associated with his rejection of womanly love, the annihilation of Orpheus, can be read as eruption of the raging Dionysus.[85] Thus, Orpheus, and the Theban King, Pentheus, who also rejects the embrace of women, are ultimately

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[81] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. by Ronald Speirs, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 76-77.

[82] According to Michel Poizat, "musical pleasure is thus a strange pleasure indeed, and if in this study I come to speak of elation, ecstasy, or gratification – of jouissance – it is insofar as this jouissance is distinct from mere pleasure." Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. by Arthur Denner, p. 4.

[83] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. by Ronald Speirs, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, p. 115.

[84] According to Emmet Robbins, "Orpheus is […] a Greek missionary preaching his Apollonian religion and asceticism among the wild barbarians of Thrace, the orgiastic devotees of the un-Greek Dionysus." Emmet Robbins, "Famous Orpheus", *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*, ed. by John Warden (London: University of Toronto Press, 1985) p. 12-13.

[85] After the death of his wife, Euridice, to quote W. S. Anderson's words, "the stories, which are mainly told by Orpheus and which are all relevant to his new pederastic and misogynistic attitudes, cumulatively function to make us ignore his feeling about Euridice (as over and dead) and force us to concentrate on the new interests, which cause his murder […] Orpheus begins to advocate love of boys, a host of trees come running. In themselves, the trees emphasize the new setting for Orpheus's song, no longer icy mountain but a shady, level patch of grass on a green hill, a cheery pastoral environment…it seems obvious that this song features pretty boys, not Euridice." See W. S. Anderson, "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid", ibid. p. 44-45.

punished because of their strict obedience of the structured and harmonious Apollonian cult. Ovid vividly depicts the bard's death scene:

> And then at last, his song unheard, his blood
> Reddened the stones. The Maenads first pounced on
> The countless birds still spellbound by his song,
> The snakes, the host of creatures of the wild,
> His glory and his triumph.[86]

In music theatre, the sacrificial theme can act as an enabling image which, in the communication between authors and audience, yields Dionysus his due recognition.

[86] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 249.

2
Unnerved Heroes

I. Energetic Madmen

> You and I must go our way;
> I have but one word to say:
> O remember, friends, that you
> Have the harder task to do
> As at freedom's puzzled feet
> Yawn the gulfs of self-defeat;
> All but heroes are unnerved
> When life and love must be deserved.[1]

In this passage, the mythical giant, Paul Bunyan, finally bids farewell to the beloved people of America whom he has nurtured and encouraged to establish themselves as a new independent state. Bunyan further informs them of the challenges which await them and warns them that the advantage of absolute freedom may eventually result in confusion and chaos in their society. The hero continues by instructing the people of the new continent that they should unite firmly as a whole nation and not doubt their principles if they are to achieve a prosperous life. W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten's only operatic collaboration fully expands an American ancestral folklore on the formation of the United States of America.[2] The opera explores the function of a secular myth. By telling the story of Paul Bunyan and his mission to help the pioneers in establishing the American identity, the work modernises this well-known myth and brings a new social and political dimension to the story.

After a series of close collaborations for the GPO Film Unit in the thirties, Auden and Britten concluded their co-operation with a full theatrical piece. *Paul Bunyan*

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[1] W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: The Libretto of the Operetta by Benjamin Britten* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) p. 70.

[2] See Donald Mitchell, "The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of *Paul Bunyan*, Auden's and Britten's 'American' Opera" in *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, by W. H.

received its premiere on 5 May, 1941.[3] In spite of the unfavourable critical reception following its first performance, the piece is still an important work in their long and enduring careers. [4] According to Mitchell, "Virgil Thomson […] in the *New York Herald Tribune* (5 May, [1941]), was characteristically waspish. The headline was "Musico-Theatrical Flop", and under it Thomson disposed first Auden's theatrical manner – 'flaccid and spineless and without energy' – and then of Britten's music: […] Melodically and harmonically it lacks the tension that we recognize as style […] its language is not the direct speech of dramatic poetry […] its subject, consequently, is not Paul Bunyan at all, nor even the loggers and farmers of the Northwest that it purports to depict."[5] The work was the first major public engagement for both the librettist and the composer since their arrival in America and they were keen to demonstrate their aspirations by presenting their version of "the American 'voice'".[6] Paul Bunyan, the mythical American giant leads his loggers to cultivate the virgin land and through exploration he inspires his people to realise the meaning of America.[7] The setting of the opera is largely symbolical and the librettist uses it as part of a founding myth structuring the story. The librettist rewrote the myth not only to fulfil his quest of exploring American identity but also to project his ideas about this into a theatrical form, possibly also in the hope of gaining recognition from his new public.[8] As a result, *Paul Bunyan* was finally presented in the form of a musical drama and given its premiere in a student production by the Theatre Association of Columbia University, New York.

Its composition is strongly tied in with its librettist's personal experience, fulfilling his wish to write a piece on the subject of "America" after he and

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Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) p. 88.

[3] See Donald Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000) p. 80-88; Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1979) p. 95.

[4] After the bitter experience of composing Paul Bunyan, Britten never allowed his following librettists to act as a forceful partner in a musical collaboration. Peter Porter, "Benjamin Britten's Librettos" in *Peter Grimes/Gloriana*, ed. by Nicholas John (London: John Calder Ltd, 1983) p.8. As for Auden, he also realised the role of a librettist is to "satisfy the composer, not the other way round." Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence, ed. by Robert Craft, 4 vols (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), III, p. 229.

[5] See Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1979) p. 133-134.

[6] See Donald Mitchell, 'The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan, Auden's and Britten's "American" Opera' in *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, by W. H. Auden, p. 88.

[7] See Paul Kildea, "Britten , Auden and 'otherness'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed, by Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 49-51.

[8] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) p. 115-119.

Christopher Isherwood first arrived in the new world.[9] To quote Nicholas Jenkins' words, "Auden's initial ideas about the United States had emphasized its approximation to the truly 'open society' as opposed to the 'closed', backward-looking societies of Europe."[10] The theme of *Paul Bunyan* echoed Auden's expectation, which was to seek out the spirit of the American identity and to elaborate the founding myth of America.[11]

The legend of Paul Bunyan perfectly suited Auden's intention to recreate an American myth. The tale concerns a giant who leads his immigrant pioneer followers in an exploration of the Promised Land, their new country. Through this exploration he inspires the formation of the American identity.[12] His giant figure symbolises the boundless territory of America. His spirit, when presented aurally on the stage leads the audience to imagine the almost supernatural power and character of Paul Bunyan. This directly leads the spectators into associating the giant figure as the guardian of this newly established nation and capturing the national spirit. Paul Bunyan's surrounding human characters are presented as loggers and farmers who work with their bare hands and as sons of the soil would form an attachment to the land.[13]

Auden's idea, of presenting the essential meaning of "America" through pioneering immigrants, echoes the eighteenth-century American writer, J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's writing, *Letters from an American Farmer* which appeared in 1782. Its publication, which came after the American Revolution, had satisfied the public's growing desire to express their sense of American identity. To quote Crèvecoeur's words, "he [an American] must greatly rejoice that he lives at a time to see this fair country discovered and settled; he must necessarily feel a share of national pride, when he views the chain of settlements which embellishes these extended shores."[14] The author based his observations of the newly formed country on his travel experience as a farmer, as he further remarks:

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[9] Auden expressed this wish in an interview with the *New York Times* in which he also indicated his expectation to work as a teacher because he thought that "the best way to study the country would be to spend eighteen months teaching in various schools." Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1981), p. 254.

[10] See Nicholas Jenkins, "Auden in America" in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. by Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 51.

[11] See Wilfrid Mellers, "Paul Bunyan: The American Eden" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) p. 97-99.

[12] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, p. 36-37.

[13] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, p. 115-116.

[14] See J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters From An American Farmer* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904) p. 48.

> The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit. The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born.[15]

Compared with Crèvecoeur's strong sense of encouragement for the people of the new nation to identify them with the country, Auden's *Paul Bunyan* gives a more flexible point of view of the forthcoming nation:

> VOICE OF PAUL BUNYAN
> Every day America's destroyed and re-created,
> America is what you do,
> America is I and you,
> America is what you choose to make it.[16]

The passage in fact is directly addressing the audience to participate in this national myth and reflects the nations strong sense of self confidence. With the sequential use of pronouns, Bunyan in fact is encouraging the American people to feel optimistic and more self assured about their country's future. The recurrence of the word, "America" demands the repetition of "am", the first person singular of the verb 'to be'; in this way, Auden indicates the new nation would gradually evolve into a united community. Paul Bunyan's final statement can also be read as Auden's personal view of the establishment of the American identity.[17] For him, it is not the land that contributes to the people's vision of their ideal world, it is the people themselves who establish the foundation of America and construct the nation according to their dreams.[18] In this piece, apart from Paul Bunyan who sets up the logging team, everyone has his own expectation of the enterprise, and the opus concludes with a happy ending, in which all of the main characters have a better place to be, thus enabling them to fulfil their individual talents.[19] The bookkeeper, Johnny Inkslinger, who originally surrendered to Paul Bunyan and agreed to join the team because of his requirement to have food, finally receives an invitation from Hollywood to work as a

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[15] Ibid, p. 55.
[16] See W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: the Libretto of the Operetta by Benjamin Britten.* p. 71.
[17] See Wilfrid Mellers, "Paul Bunyan: The American Eden" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer, p. 97-98.
[18] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, p. 32-33.
[19] See Act I, scene I: *Lumberjack's Chorus*. W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan.* p. 22.

technical adviser. The Swedish foreman, Hel Helson, whose vacillating character was tamed by Paul Bunyan, eventually joins the Administration in Washington. The good cook, Slim, who had set off to explore the world, finds his true love, Tiny, Paul Bunyan's daughter; and ultimately finds a position, managing a hotel in mid-Manhattan. While the characters' diverse destiny exposes the inconsistency in the time scheme in the opera, the detachment from real time is, in fact, what the librettist is aiming for. Through the juxtaposition of various American institutions in different periods, Auden's work transcends the audience's lineal concept of history and creates a mythic frame. As a result, in *Paul Bunyan*, "America" signifies various things according to the dreams of each individual to be found in this Promised Land.[20]

By employing the Bunyan myth, Auden can therefore directly link with his American audience's sense of national identity. Paul Bunyan's mythical aspect also enables the English poet to translate a celebrated story into the format of music theatre. In a mythic narrative, a story does not require a realistic setting; furthermore, symbols can function as a binding feature to unite otherwise various elements into its plot. In *Paul Bunyan*, for example, the giant is a symbol of the force of nature which assists and encourages the pioneers to build a new nation. The roles of the bookkeeper, Johnny Inkslinger and the foreman, Hel Helson are well contrasted characters among Bunyan's lumberjacks. Inkslinger represents a person with intelligence while Helson embodies a man with raw physical strength. Inkslinger's song contains rich cultural and literary references and its witty and amusing lines are well suited to the bookkeeper's character. On the other hand, Helson has not been given any solo aria but has been featured in various vocal ensembles demonstrating the librettist's intention to show that the role is heavily reliant on the co-operation of the others. "Helson the Brave" and "Helson the Strong" have further underlined his robust reputation.

The setting of *Paul Bunyan* is strongly symbolic. The piece is entirely set in a forest. The trees in the prologue reflect the regeneration of the new continent over the past centuries. The singing trees therefore symbolise untamed nature as they are waiting for the pioneers to explore the forest's resources in order to establish a new nation. The symbolism which Auden uses is clearly intended to give the opera a

[20] See Donald Mitchell, 'The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan, Auden's and Britten's "American" Opera' in *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, by W. H. Auden, p. 125-130.

mythic quality.[21] According to the librettist's observation, "America is unique in being the only country to create myths after the occurrence of the industrial revolution. Because it was an undeveloped continent with an open frontier and a savage climate, conditions favourable to myth-making still existed."[22] This grand enthusiasm for depicting the forming of the nation is reflected in the Prologue, where the old trees not only embody the mythic characteristic of the opera but also describe the inevitable formation of the nation.

> Since the birth
> Of the earth
> Time has gone
> On and on:
> Rivers saunter,
> Rivers run,
> Till they enter
> The enormous sea,
> Where they prefer to be.[23]

The Prologue also sets down a foundation for the following acts – building up a raw atmosphere for the characters to explore and cultivate.[24] The grand scale of the prologue of the piece can even stand comparison with Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold: Vorabend des Bühnenfestspiels «Der Ring des Nibelungen»* (1869), in that Auden succeeds in drawing a complete picture of the events which will unfold in the opera itself. Both *Das Rheingold* and *Paul Bunyan* begin with the image of a flowing river. The two works suggest that nature is the cradle for all living beings and that a harmonious condition would ensure national prosperity. Furthermore, the two operas are dealing with a founding myth. While *Das Rheingold* illustrates the formation of the world's order, *Paul Bunyan* depicts the creation of the new world of America. From both the literary and musical perspective, the Prologue to *Paul Bunyan* is less complex than *Das Rheingold*, but the librettist's ambition to achieve a mythical and epic scale is unmistakable.[25]

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[21] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, p. 115.
[22] See W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: the Libretto of the Operetta by Benjamin Britten.* p. 1.
[23] See *Paul Bunyan*, Prologue.
[24] See Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten & Tippett: Studies in Themes & Techniques* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 68-70.
[25] Mrs Auden often went to Bayreuth with her sisters before her marriage and she also taught Wystan the love-duet from *Tristan*. The poet told his friend after being introduced to appreciate opera by Kallman, "I've become a Wagner fan." See H. Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*. p. 261-262.

Bunyan's final verse reveals the giant hero's intention of leaving and his hopes for the newly established community. The phrase, "All I had to do is done, / You remain but I go on"[26] vividly expresses the giant's successful accomplishment of his mission and further depicts his determination to leave his beloved people to continue to construct for themselves their own land and its distinct national character. In this way, Bunyan's farewell not only leads to the immigrants' autonomous state but also encourages this newly formed nation to forge its own national character. All these optimistic national characteristics which are captured by Auden, are meant not only enhance the audience's self confidence in being American but also represent the poet's determination to integrate with America, the country he is so eager to be identified with.[27] Auden's decision to employ the style of musical theatre as the narrative form for *Paul Bunyan* also demonstrates his enthusiasm to gain recognition from the American public.[28] Influenced as he was by dynamic artistic activities, especially the burgeoning of theatre, film and radio in the thirties and following on from having written a series of songs with the collaboration of Benjamin Britten, it must have seemed the logical next step for Auden to write a full-length musical theatre piece to celebrate the American spirit.[29] This fulfilled his desire to write an American piece, a wish which dated back to his arrival there. A "Broadway" style piece formed the basis of the project, even though *Paul Bunyan* premiered at Columbia University.[30] Donald Mitchell reports "though a Broadway first night may not have materialized, and whether or not one concludes that it was a sensible or realistic ambition in the first place, there can be no denying that the Broadway idea (or goal) had a vital influence on the shaping of *Paul Bunyan* and was responsible for some of its most prominent features."[31]

Paul Bunyan seems to have originated as the hero of lumberjack tales which may have been passed down for generations. The story had never been heard outside the haunts of the lumberjack until it first appeared in printed form in 1914. According to W. B Laughead's study, "the best authorities never recounted Paul Bunyan's exploits

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[26] W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: The Libretto of the Operetta by Benjamin Britten*, p. 69, line 7 and 8.
[27] See Thekla Clark, *Wystan and Chester: A Personal Memoir of W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) p. 95-96.
[28] See Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 95-96.
[29] Ibid, p. 37.
[30] See Donald Mitchell, 'The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan, Auden's and Britten's "American" Opera' in *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, by W. H. Auden, p.87-90.
[31] See W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: the Libretto of the Operetta by Benjamin Britten,* p. 91.

in narrative form. They made their statements more impressive by dropping them casually, in an off-hand way, as if in reference to actual events of common knowledge. To overawe the greenhorn in the bunkshanty, or the paper-collar stiffs and home guards in the saloons, a group of lumberjacks would remember meeting each other in the camps of Paul Bunyan. With painful accuracy they established the exact time and place, 'on the Big Onion the winter of the blue snow' or 'at Shot Gunderson's camp on the Tadpole the year of the sourdough drive.' They elaborated on the old themes and new stories were born in lying contests where the heights of extemporaneous invention were reached."[32] The appearance of the Bunyan myth is itself a symbol of America's growing sense of national identity in the early twentieth century.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the United Sates of America had been transformed from a rural, agrarian community into an urban, industrialised society which welcomed immigrants from a wide variety of countries. The nation's growing political and financial power had also led to its growing involvement in international affairs. The victory of the Spanish-American War of 1898 had prompted America into becoming a major imperialistic nation. However, as being a newly established country, America lacked a national myth which could fully capture the nation's concept in cosmic and social order and celebrate its shared values and hopes of assimilation. The publication of *Paul Bunyan and His Big Blue Ox* was intended to fill this gap.

By using the existing myth, Auden and Britten intended to interpret the idea of American identity. The story of Paul Bunyan provided the poet and the composer with an appropriate paradigm in which they could detach themselves from European customs and one which would lead them directly into the core of American traditions. Furthermore, the heroic story also supplied Auden and Britten with a narrative structure which enabled them to communicate with their targeted American audience. By re-telling the story of Paul Bunyan, both the poet and composer were not only converting the nation's colonial history into a form of art but also were inviting their audience to confront America's past with its present. *Paul Bunyan* thus represents Auden and Britten's mythopoeic attempt to embrace their new residential nation and an aspect of this embrace was the partial adoption of a distinctive American form, the

[32] See W. B. Laughead, *The Marvelous Exploits of Paul Bunyan* (Doylestown: Wildside Press, 1934) p.

musical.

The musical, which is derived from European operetta, is a "major form of popular musical theatre of the 20th century."[33] According to Andrew Lamb, the musical is "a brand of musical theatre distinct from the operetta [in] the incorporation of contemporary subjects, everyday characters and essentially American style of song and voice production with origins in the vaudeville theatre."[34] Though the piece is set in a mythically anachronistic period of American history, *Paul Bunyan* still reflects the contemporary American's optimistic spirits. Human characters in the piece not only mirror the young country's thriving economic development but also echo the origins of its citizens from various backgrounds and with different ambitions, all striving to achieve their personal potential.[35] In order to re-express a founding myth of America, Auden wrote the piece in a serious, almost didactic fashion, and even though *Paul Bunyan* still has traces of the operetta, the tonality of the piece impedes the librettist from making any joke on the subject.

With regard to Johnny Inkslinger and Hel Helson for example, their characters are designed to represent "the struggle between brain and brawn."[36] The librettist reveals his intentions:

> These are eternal human types: Helson, the man of brawn but no brains, invaluable as long as he has somebody to give him orders whom he trusts, but dangerous when his consciousness of lacking intelligence turns into suspicion and hatred of those who possess it; and Inkslinger, the man of speculative and critical intelligence, whose temptation is to despise those who do the manual work that makes the life of thought possible.[37]

Britten's music for the piece also reflects Auden's intention to present the "American voice". Musically speaking, the work commences in the style of a Broadway musical production, even though he later modifies this genre and style and even incorporates

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[33] See Andrew Lamb, "Musical", in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Stanley Sadie. 4 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1992). III. p. 525-528.

[34] See Andrew Lamb, "Musical", in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. by Stanley Sadie. 4 vols. III. p. 525-526.

[35] See Donald Mitchell, 'The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan, Auden's and Britten's "American" Opera' in *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, by W. H. Auden, p. 96-98.

[36] Ibid, p. 97.

[37] Ibid, p. 2.

operatic manners into the composition.[38] The upshot of this is that *Paul Bunyan* rather lacks a sense of direction with regard to both musical and verbal composition. Britten's first operatic composition is tends towards musical pastiche which never identifies its dramatic purposes. Auden's verses in the operetta only stand out individually but it is difficult to unite them to form a convincing narrative. Because of this style of writing, the work gives the appearance of being in the form of a musical mosaic – in that it is a compilation of various music theatre traditions rather than a new entity of its own.

Even though both Auden and Britten were superficially following the Broadway style for presenting *Paul Bunyan*, the work is still categorised as an operetta.[39] This musical genre is as its name indicates – a little opera, which basically is structured with a number of songs to tell a story, just as an opera does. However, operetta tends to employ "light" subjects, such as political satires and romances with spoken dialogue and dances.[40] The music in operetta is highly melodic; these melodic tunes in fact act as stylistic markers which signal to the audience the character of the piece and how it should be "read". Jacques Offenbach's works such as *La Belle Hélène* (1864) and *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein* (1867) are good examples of this musical genre.[41] Initially, Offenbach offered programmes of two or three satirical one-act sketches, which in turn led to the extension of the format into works of a whole evening's duration and to the establishment of *opéra bouffe* as a separately identifiable form of full-length entertainment.[42]

In Austria, Johann Strauss, Jr. provided a German version of this popular musical form in the late nineteenth century. He emphasised romantic themes, rather than the satirical manner to be found in the French works of Offenbach. Furthermore, his works relied on dance rhythms, especially the waltz. His collaboration with Carl Haffner and Richard Genée, *Die Fledermaus* (1874) demonstrates the German operetta style and this work is often performed in a standard opera house.[43] The best known English operettas dating from the late nineteenth century were those written

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[38] See Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten & Tippett: Studies in Themes & Techniques*, p. 68-70.
[39] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, p. 115.
[40] See Leslie Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987) p. 210-212.
[41] See Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, 4th edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 378-379.
[42] See "Operetta" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed, by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1996) p. 707-713.
[43] See Leslie Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History*, p. 206-208.

by the collaboration of Gilbert and Sullivan. Their works "owed much to the British theatrical traditions of ballad opera and burlesque and even something to the Victoria choral tradition."[44] Their works directly influenced the formation and style of the twentieth-century musical. *Paul Bunyan* contains strong local melody, spoken dialogue and dance rhythms and these characteristics suggest that the appropriate category of the work is operetta.

However, the grand opening of the work reveals operatic roots. While Paul Bunyan's speeches draw a direct link to the tradition of operetta, the giant's words tend to be more didactic and portentous than an operetta counterpart.[45] On the other hand, the songs and duets apportioned to Slim and Tiny, come straight from the Broadway tradition.[46] Slim's cowboy song also evokes an open-air, rolling prairie-land atmosphere:

> I come from open spaces
> Where over endless grass
> The stroking winds and shadows
> Of cloud and bison pass;
> My brothers were the buffalos,
> My house the shining day,
> I danced between the horse-hoofs like
> A butterfly at play.[47]

The boundless field has provided Slim with a joyful characteristic and his optimism. As the character fully enjoys the rural life and the company of buffaloes and horses, the desire of obtaining material goods has not corrupted his mind. Slim's song is a forecast of Roger and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943) and Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) in which the cowboy theme was further woven into the fabric of the musical. Like Slim, Annie's carefree attitude is fully evidenced in her lines:

> Talking stock of what I have, and what I haven't,
> What do I find?
> The things I've got will keep me satisfied.
> Checking up on what I have, and what I haven't,
> What do I find?

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[44] See "Operetta" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. p. 707-713.
[45] See Wilfrid Mellers, "Paul Bunyan: The American Eden" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer, p. 98-99.
[46] Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) p. 148.
[47] See *Paul Bunyan*, Act I scene ii. p. 40.

A healthy balance on the credit side.[48]

The heroine finds herself completely satisfied with her country life; she does not need to live in luxury. Berlin's simple and repetitive lyrics reflect Annie's uncomplicated outlook on life and a cheerful aspect so common in the genre of American musical theatre. Mitchell observes, "[The] chronology shows with what ingenuity Britten and Auden occupied a specifically American musical space, a territory that had already been defined and which, long after *Paul Bunyan* had been first performed and then virtually forgotten, was to be further exploited, to great popular acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic."[49]

Inkslinger's song also demonstrates Auden's talent for composing the lyrics in the style of American musical theatre:

In this emergency
Of so much urgency,
    What can I do?
Except wax lyrical?
Don't look satirical;
I have empirical
    Proof I love you.[50]

The verbal humour and rhythmic energy has been successfully captured by Auden's words. The entire stanza presents the narrator's unfeigned desire to express his love for Tiny, the daughter of Bunyan. The rapid and yet metrical style of the rhythm is also reminiscent of the manner that Auden was still using his late 1930's poetic style. In Inkslinger's love song, the librettist was preoccupied with its individual poetic style rather than using the verse to further plot or characterisation. And, as hinted above, this stylistic eclecticism in *Paul Bunyan* also infects the music. The "a little of everything" style did not win the critics' approval.[51] Olin Downes criticised the piece in the *New York Times* on 6 May 1941, "the music seems to wander from one to another idea, without conviction or cohesion."[52] Downes' criticism points out that the

[48] See Irving Berlin, *I Got the Sun in the Morning* (London: Warner/Chappell Music Publishing, 1946) p. 1.
[49] See Donald Mitchell, 'The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan, Auden's and Britten's "American" Opera' in *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, by W. H. Auden, p. 98-99.
[50] See W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan: The Libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) p. 78.
[51] Ibid.
[52] See Donald Mitchell, 'The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan, Auden's and Britten's "American" Opera' in *Paul Bunyan: The libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, by W.

musical style in the operetta is not united to serve the plot and Britten does not seem to have a concrete idea about its musical direction. As the piece was Britten first major stage work, the lack of experience in musical theatre showed in his tendency, in constructing the operetta, to fall back on the knowledge of writing song-cycles he had gained in the 1930's.

The categorical complexity in *Paul Bunyan* was probably also increased by the lack of time available to the composer to spend on the project, partly because of the state of his health and perhaps more crucially by his librettist's revisions, which frequently occurred at the last moment.[53] As the project had begun with Auden's idea, Britten tended to compromise between his and the librettist's intentions.[54] It was certainly the case that the extra music usually had to be composed either on the day of rehearsal or the day before.[55] This lack of preparation time for the composer seems to have thrown the composer back on to his considerable talent for pastiche. Furthermore, "the limitation and potentialities of the cast" can be considered to have had an influence on the stylistic resources available. Mitchell reports that "the concept of communal, workshop theatre was strong at this time, with the implication of opening up the arts to the non-professional."[56] *Paul Bunyan* was, as Britten explained in a letter to his publisher Ralph Hawkes, designed to be "school operetta."[57] Thus, the work was written for performance by unprofessional or amateur performers and this led to the music being written in an approachable fashion.[58]

For the composer, the creation of *Paul Bunyan* was a bitter experience and he personally viewed the work unenthusiastically,[59] "I feel that I have learned lots about what not to write for the theatre."[60] The most important lesson he took on board, was that he would never allow himself to be dominated by any future librettist.[61] All of his subsequent operas were based on his own ideas and he would only seek a collaborator after he had drawn a blueprint of the proposed project. His librettists

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H. Auden, p. 131.
[53] Ibid. p. 91.
[54] See Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, p. 277-278.
[55] This was revealed by Mordecai Baumann, the original narrator in an interview with Donald Mitchell in April 1977. Ibid, p.115.
[56] Ibid. p. 128.
[57] Ibid, p. 89.
[58] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, p. 36-37.
[59] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, p. 36.
[60] See B*enjamin Britten: A Biography*, p. 150.

would be required to follow his outline in producing text, in other words, the composers wishes were paramount throughout the whole collaboration.[62]

Despite the negative critical reviews, *Paul Bunyan* was a turning point in Auden's career, especially in terms of his poetic style and content.[63] During the late 1930s and the early 1940s, the poet "ended his long ambivalent flirtation with Marxism, repudiated (though not in every detail) the Freudian image of the self and reclaimed the Christian faith of his childhood."[64] One can witness some of these changes in *Paul Bunyan*.[65] Even though the work emphasises the collaborative strength of the pioneers who eventually create the nation, the presence of the supra-natural power of Paul Bunyan, suggests other readings to the founding myth of America. *Paul Bunyan,* despite Auden's desire to be assimilated into the American scene, is still very European. Bunyan has mythic qualities and is frequently morally sententious, but he is entirely without American religiosity. The character remains a fundamentally secular myth of social and political destiny.

II. Grimes's Exercises

Benjamin Britten and Montagu Slater's only collaboration, *Peter Grimes* is derived from George Crabbe's poem, *The Borough*. The story presents the tragic downfall of a social outcast, Peter Grimes and his final self-surrender to the

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[61] Ibid.

[62] See Peter Porter, "Benjamin Britten's Librettos" in *English National Opera Guide: Peter Grimes/Gloriana by Britten*, ed. by Nicholas John, p. 8-9.

[63] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, p. 118-119.

[64] See Alan Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1998) p. 4.

[65] See Peter Porter, "Benjamin Britten's Librettos" in *English National Opera Guide: Peter Grimes/Gloriana by Britten*, ed. by Nicholas John, p. 8-9; Alan Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1998) p. xvi

community's gossip and hostility towards him.[66] In fact, in the opera, the ultimate goal in Grimes' life does not appear to be as complex as the audience might imagine.

PETER

I'll fish the sea dry,
Sell the good catches-
That wealthy merchant
Grimes will set up
Household and shop.
You will all see it!
I'll marry Ellen![67]

This passage immediately draws the audience's attention to Peter Grimes' dangerous blend of hope and fantasy. The protagonist has already planned a future of being a wealthy fisherman and settling down with the widow, Ellen Orford. His method of achieving his aim exposes an initial sign of his ultimate fate and nemesis. "I'll fish the sea dry" may demonstrate Grimes' determination and his appetite for tireless labour, which he believes, will ultimately enable him to achieve financial stability and earn the respect of the Borough's inhabitants; but its hyperbole also announces his uncertain grasp of the realities of his situation.[68]

In *Peter Grimes* there is a tension within the story between the quasi-realistic nature of the situation and the tendency towards mythic narrative. At the expressive level this is linked to the differences between the rather mundane everyday speech and its recitative and the more ornate and "poetic" diction used in the arias. In order to create an adequate verbal text for musical amalgamation, Slater adopted the eighteenth-century practice in which libretti were composed with the structure of recitative and aria. In this convention, the librettist is able to use recitatives for dramatic and narrative purposes while employing the poetic aria form to enable the composer lyric musical expansion. An example of this clear division is to be found in Act I scene ii in which the villagers' conversational dialogues are instantly interrupted by Grimes' poetic monologue.

PETER

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[66] See Hans Keller, "Peter Grimes: the story, the music not excluded" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) p. 105-120.

[67] *Peter Grimes*, act I scene I by Montagu Slater and Benjamin Britten.

[68] See Philip Brett, "'*Fiery visions*' (and revisions): '*Peter Grimes*' in progress" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes,* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 47-48.

Now the Great Bear and Pleiades
where earth moves
Are drawing up the clouds
of human grief
Breathing solemnity in the deep night.[69]

Grimes' aria is a sharp contrast with the villagers' dialogic recitatives. The rich poetic images such as "the Great Bear" and "Pleiades and "human grief" is a stylistic marker to draw a sharp distinction between the intruder, Grimes and the Borough residents in the pub scene. Here the librettist is intending to use a colloquial, almost naturalist manner to construct recitative while employing a high-flown poetic style to formulate aria. Slater's poetic style in *Peter Grimes* is at times excessively abstract, figurative and overly explicit which causes Britten technical difficulties to seamlessly transit from recitative to aria.

Grimes' use of an upturned boat for his hut also illustrates the opera's blend of realistic and mythic elements. There are two reasons for the remote positioning of the hut, firstly to symbolically mark the protagonist's isolation from the community, and secondly to set a location for the seemingly accidental death of the second apprentice. Therefore, in the opera an apparently realistic detail is not actually what it seems to be. The burden which surrounds the protagonist is symbolic and it feeds into the mythic status of Grimes as an outsider from and antagonist of his society. The conflict of his desire for acceptance and normalcy and the turbulence of his inner nature ensures that he will ultimately be denied.

The protagonist's commitment to such an unrealistic plan reveals his desperation to earn social recognition and the respect of his fellows.[70] Yet, ominously, the opera opens with an inquest, in which Grimes is accused of drowning his young apprentice.[71] The image of drowning, arguably establishes the dramatic tone that will dominate the piece. The opening inquest pinpoints not only the gruesome working conditions but also Grimes' temperamental nature, which his young apprentices have to endure. Also promptly established is a strong sense of distrust among the Borough's residents about the suitability of Grimes as an

[69] See *Peter Grimes*, Act I, scene ii.
[70] See Stephen Arthur Allen, "'He descended into Hell': Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 81-83.
[71] See Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 104-107.

employer. After the inquest, the instinctive reaction of Hobson the carrier is to refuse any involvement in providing Grimes with another apprentice from the workhouse.

Peter Grimes also reveals the fate of the vulnerable and exploited workers in a horrifying and compelling manner, compelled, as they are, to labour for a harsh master and against the back-drop of the elemental power of the stormy sea and the unremitting forces of nature.[72] Moreover, the hostile rumours against the protagonist, made by the residents of the Borough, parallel the destructive force which comes from the relentless character of the sea, to which, appropriately, Grimes eventually surrenders his life.[73] In each act of the opera, the unsympathetic rumours about Grimes slowly build up to be as fatal as the waves to which the protagonist has no choice other than submit himself. His suicide seems to be the only likely outcome from his relationship with the turbulent sea.[74] The hero's inability to tame either the sea or the villagers' rumours or his own nature has finally resulted in his death.

As well as the protagonist of the opera, it is arguable that the sea itself is to be seen as the central character in the whole work.[75] In fact, Britten and Slater's collaboration clearly emphasises the everlasting struggle between the coastal inhabitants and the sea, which provides and yet threatens their livelihood.[76] To quote Britten's own words, "I want to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea – difficult though it is to treat such a universal subject in the theatrical form."[77] Indeed, the entire thematic layout of the work is structured upon mirroring the changeful and dangerous sea and the bitter struggles between Peter Grimes and the villagers.[78]

In this, the dramatic function of the sea fulfils the same purpose as the chorus in ancient Greek drama. In the opera, the sea has been successfully transformed into orchestral sounds, which introduce and re-act with the characters.[79] While the libretto

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[72] See P. J. White, "Working Children" in The Royal Opera House Programme for *Peter Grimes* 2003-2004, p. 18-19.
[73] See Frank Withehead, *George Crabbe: A Reappraisal* (London: Associated University Press, 1995) p. 83-88.
[74] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten; Expression and Evasion*, p. 41-43.
[75] See Stephen Walsh, "A Commentary on the Music" in *English National Opera Guide: Peter Grimes/Gloriana by Britten*, ed. by Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1983) p. 23-25.
[76] See J. W. Garbutt, "Music and motive in *Peter Grimes*" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 163-171.
[77] Benjamin Britten, "An Introduction to *Peter Grimes*" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 149.
[78] See Philip Brett, "'*Fiery visions*' (and revisions): '*Peter Grimes*' in progress" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 47-48.
[79] See Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 112-117; Claire Seymour, *The Operas of*

is telling the story and providing poetic pieces for the protagonist's arias, the sea interludes initially seem to be concerned with the sea itself and rather than with the people who live by it with the interludes presenting a kind of timeless perspective that dwarfs the temporary concerns of the village. But Grimes' intense association with the sea constitutes a link between the general and the immediate particular. Stephen Arthur Allen notes, "if the 'sea' can be understood almost as another operatic character, it becomes so primarily through its symbolic representation of human emotions; it may be seen to have the potential for providing a commentary on the dramatic action, mediating between it and the audience."[80] The six orchestral interludes constitute the dramatic structure of the piece, and with these musical elements the composer is able to make immediate in the lives of his characters the overwhelming power of the North Sea.[81]

Apart from these sonic interludes, the residents of the Borough also gather force as a united voice to be a kind of chorus in the opera. Their unified condemnation of Grimes has further isolated the doomed protagonist. The dramatic usage of choruses in *Paul Bunyan* and *Peter Grimes* is instructively different. The dramatic structure in Britten's earlier operetta does not rely on the chorus. Furthermore, the American pioneers in Auden's text are merely supporting the soloists without passing dramatic comments and judgements on other characters. However, the portrayal of Slater's ostracised hero is largely dependent upon the sharp contrast between the Borough residents as a chorus and Grimes himself.

The waves of this musical narrative, further demonstrate Peter Grimes' incessant battle with both his local community and himself. Peter Evan argues, "the storm is interpreted in its dramatic context as a reflection of 'the turbulent and yearning aspect of Peter's mind'. So there is a regular alternation between the static introductory pictures, of dawn, high noon and moonlit evening over the sea, and the three dynamic studies of Grimes placed at the center of each phase of dramatic action."[82] The sea might also be read as the embodiment of Peter Grimes' dream of success and is directly associated with the protagonist's obsessive longing for

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Benjamin Britten; Expression and Evasion, p. 46.

[80] Stephen Arthur Allen, "'He descended into Hell' : Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 81.

[81] See Benjamin Britten, "Introduction" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 148-149.

[82] Peter Evens, *The Music of Benjamin Britten,* p. 116.

acceptance, almost part of his emotions.[83] Thus, when every element that Grimes heavily depends upon starts to tumble, and the everlasting rumours against him in the village turn to sinister action, he has no choice but to surrender himself to the sea in order to regain the final composure he longs for.[84] Peter Grimes is not only the casualty of his own dream he is also the victim of the Borough's relentless damaging rumours.

In *Peter Grimes*, the tragic downfall of the protagonist is partially due to his poor social relations with the Borough. Like the protagonist, Boles also finds himself something of an outcast from his community because of his Methodist faith. However, Grimes' solitary behaviour and his maltreatment of his apprentices are the other important factors which lead to his ultimate expulsion from the community. Although Grimes originates from the Borough, he is portrayed as a perpetual outsider. Indeed, Grimes is so deeply rooted in the village that he can not accept Balstrode's suggestion to leave and remains to fulfil his sacrificial role not only the victim of the expulsive social networking in the Borough, but also the victim of his own exclusive character and his supposedly scandalous deeds.

In Crabbe's original poem Grimes is portrayed as a mere 'villainous fisherman',[85] but in Slater and Britten's adaptation, the ruthless character has been transformed into a brutal romantic idealist, whose determination and obsession in gaining his ideal, outbalance the communal need for social order.[86] To quote Peter Pears' reflection on the role he created in 1945: "Grimes was undoubtedly a harsh master, but his fits of rage would very probably have passed unnoticed if he had no truck with the Borough and it would not tolerate him […] He is very much of an ordinary weak person who, being at odds with the society in which he finds himself, tries to overcome it and, in doing so, offends against the conventional code, is classed by society as criminal, and destroyed as such."[87] The focus of the entire piece can be seen as Grimes' vision framed by the process of his method of achieving it; in so doing, the obstacles emanating from the community eventually result in him being

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[83] See Stephen Arthur Allen, "'He descended into Hell': Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 81-82.
[84] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten; Expression and Evasion*, p. 74.
[85] As Peter Pears suggests. See Peter Pears, "Neither A Hero Nor A Villain" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 150.
[86] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten; Expression and Evasion*, p. 43.
[87] Peter Pears, "Neither A Hero Nor A Villain" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 150-152.

broken by social pressures.[88] In act two, scene two, Grimes reveals his longing to his new apprentice before they set sail for the 'big catch'. The protagonist is clearly hoping the boy will comprehend his motivation and desire for endless labour.

> PETER
> In dreams I've built myself some kindlier home,
> Warm in my heart and in a golden calm,
> Where there'll be no more fear and no more storm.
> […]
> But dreaming builds what dreaming can disown.
> Dead fingers stretch themselves to tear it down.
> I hear those voices that will not be drowned
> Calling, there is no stone
> In earth's thickness to make a home,
> That you can build with and remain alone.[89]

In this passage, Grimes initially paints the image of his ultimate dream which is to build a "kindlier home", then, gradually reveals the idyllic state he is hoping to achieve for the rest of his life, "no more fear and no more storm". The poetic colours which Grimes makes use of to describe this Utopian image of a perfect home, are full of serenity, warmth and brightness.[90] Furthermore, the fisherman's sincere yearning is also reflected in the phonic tone in the passage "Warm in my heart and in a golden calm" which is not simply a metaphorical description of Peter Grimes' visionary home but the poetic sound also subtly reveals the protagonist's subconscious aspirations. The passage once again underlines the narrative conflict within the opera. Grimes' aria, on the one hand depicts the quasi-realistic element in which things can go one way or another but it also reflects the mythic elements in the story which the narrative tends to point in the direction of inevitability. According to David Pascoe, "there is a larger point here, for Grimes's arias also make composition palpable; they force us to identify ourselves as an audience, for we are mirrored by the rapt listeners on stage: the terrified boys, or the regulars in the pub. We are caught in the narrative of his voice, as he hears, and reproduces, the voices which will not be drowned, and

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[88] See Hans Keller, "Peter Grimes: the story, the music not excluded" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, 105-106.
[89] *Peter Grimes*, act II scene ii.
[90] See Stephen Arthur Allen, "'He descended into Hell': Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 90-93.

which prevent him co-operating with Ellen."[91] Although the words in the passage depict Grimes' ultimate aspiration and his optimism, the rhyme gruesomely reveals the protagonist's everlasting entrenchment. The words such as "home", "storm", "alone", "disown" and "stone" conjure up a claustrophobic atmosphere which will eventually overwhelm the hero.

As Grimes continues his meditative soliloquy, the optimistic tone in his words is gradually replaced by a pessimistic sentiment. The hostility from the inhabitants of the Borough is clearly a large part of the protagonist's anguish.[92] The desire of Grimes to be different and simultaneously accepted is not just cognitive dissonance on the part of Grimes, it is reflected in mundane hypocrisies of the village at large. The point in the opera that Boles in being both a Methodist and a drunkard is that Methodists were supposed to be much stricter in their lives than the Anglicans. Part of Grimes' function is to be an outsider to unite the village against him, so that in purging him they can draw closer together and despite their own faults feel a collective righteousness. However at another level, Grimes symbolises the tensions and conflicts within the community itself and his death is like that of the scapegoat driven into the wilderness bearing with it the sins of the people. Peter Porter comments, "although it is true that Grimes is seen by Crabbe and by Slater and Britten as an outsider figure, he is no typical tragic hero. His fate, as shown by both poet and librettist, is almost foredoomed, and on his struggle they hang the themes of the harsh life of the fishing community, and the power of an indifferent Nature, moulding all men, conformists and rebels alike, to rituals of accommodation."[93] Being a rebellious character, Grimes cannot avoid being sacrificed in order to restore the social order to the Borough.[94]

Another reading of Peter Grimes' downfall sees it as being a result of the altercation between Grimes' belief in individual romanticism and the Borough's firmly established social Augustanism.[95] Although Slater and Britten's opera is set "towards 1830", Crabbe's original poem is in fact placed rather earlier, at the end of

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[91] See David Pascoe, 'Taking Liberties with English Libretti', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. XLIV (1994), p. 97.
[92] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, p. 136-138
[93] See Peter Porter, "Benjamin Britten's Librettos" in English National *Opera Guide: Peter Grimes/ Gloriana by Britten* ed. by Nicholas John, p. 13.
[94] See Gavin Edwards, *George Crabbe's Poetry on Border Land* (Dyfed: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) p. 150-152.
[95] See Frank Whitehead, *George Crabbe: A Reappraisal*, 151-154.

the eighteenth-century, thus locating it at the watershed of the dialectic human evolution from neo-classicism to romanticism.[96] According to John Lucas' study:

> An Augustan (such as George Crabbe) accepted that man should pay all his allegiance to the society he found ready-made. To depart from this would be uncivilized and in Augustan poetry the accent always falls upon the civilized, the polite and the socially acceptable ways of behaving…the city is where men are identified with a common purpose - to serve society – and are obliged to minimize their individuality…for this reason originality is despised as is any work that does not show a proper respect for civilized values.[97]

Grimes' ruthless attempts to achieve his personal aspiration severely challenges the firmly established conventions of the Borough, and such inordinate behaviour has invited the villagers' strong suspicion regarding the deaths of his unfortunate, innocent young apprentices.[98]

In the second act of the libretto, upon overhearing the conversation between Peter Grimes and Ellen Orford, a couple of the villagers begin to exchange their perceptions of the doomed fisherman.

> NED
> See the glitter in his eyes!
> Grimes is at his exercise.
> BOLES
> What he fears is that the Lord
> Follows with a flaming sword!
> AUNTIE
> You see all thro' crazy eyes.
> ALL THREE
> Grimes is at his exercise.[99]

This passage vividly reflects the general attitude of the inhabitants of the Borough towards Peter Grimes. The fact that these three characters, namely Ned Keene, Robert Boles and Auntie, do not even try to comprehend the overheard conversation between Orford and Grimes, exposes the latent hostility which the protagonist unjustly

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[96] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, p.122-124.
[97] See John Lucas, "Introduction" in *A Selection From George Crabbe* ed. by John Lucas (London: Longman, 1967) p. 10.
[98] See Stephen Arthur Allen, "'He descended into Hell': Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 81-83.
[99] *Peter Grimes*, act II scene i.

encounters within his community. The librettist's use of the word 'exercise', also depicts the misconception of Peter Grimes by the inhabitants of the Borough. For the villagers, "Grimes is at his exercise" implies their firm belief that the protagonist is yet again practising his perceived vicious deed of murdering his newly arrived young apprentice. Robert Boles' second line is a precise Biblical allusion from Genesis 3:22-24. By using the image of Cherubim, Boles is indicating that the Borough can be compared with the Garden of Eden and Grimes' intrusion is associated with original sin; satanic influence, even. Therefore, "a flaming sword" would be the only way to eliminate the corrupted Grimes from continuing in his venture any further.

The status of Grimes is even more marked if one consider the "hypocrisy" of the Borough, in which the Methodist Boles is a drunkard, the respectable Mrs Sedley is an opium addict and Auntie, who with a façade of respectability runs the village pub frequented by the Rector, nevertheless keeps a bawdy-house; yet all are happily united in condemning Grimes. Their unified condemnation is partly because of the suspicion that he actually has killed his former apprentice and may be taken to indicate that that there are reasonable limits to the villagers' tolerance. However, the main reason for their hypocritical sneer towards Grimes is that his character isolates him from the village in which he wants to become a respected figure. The killing of children is safely not acceptable but that the villagers are willing to act upon mere supposition reflects moral double-standards that do not draw a similar line at getting drunk and visiting whores.

On the other hand, for the fisherman, 'his exercise' is merely indicating his on-going activity of accomplishing his personal aspiration. Furthermore, the passage also underlines the indifferent atmosphere which Grimes has to endure in the Borough.[100] As Peter Porter observes: "Crabbe asks rhetorically why no-one raised a hand to help Grimes' workhouse slaves, but comments that all they ever said on hearing of the children's misery was – 'Grimes is at his exercise'. This line becomes the key passage in the great scene in Act Two when, after church, the Borough is aroused to invade Grimes' hut."[101] It might have seemed a rational possibility for Grimes to try his fortune somewhere else as Captain Balstrode urges him, "Why not

[100] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten; Expression and Evasion*, p. 55-57.
[101] Peter Porter, "Benjamin Britten's Librettos" in *Opera Guide for Peter Grimes/ Gloriana by Britten* ed. by Nicholas John, p. 14.

try the wider sea/ With merchantman or privateer?"[102] But the protagonist's uncompromising character, coupled with the strong sense of attachment he holds for his birthplace, force him to refuse to accept the option of leaving the Burough and the assault of the villagers drives him to near madness and eventual acceptance of his fate as scapegoat.[103]

Although the dramatic theme in *Peter Grimes* is focused on the protagonist's personal struggle against communal prejudice; the loss of Grimes' young apprentices, should also be equally addressed as a main subject in the opera.[104] Slater and Britten's only collaboration, in fact, opens with the Borough's public inquest following upon the death of the youth, William Spode, Grimes' apprentice, who died of thirst on board Grimes' fishing smack during their journey to London, in order to sell a "huge catch".[105] Slater and Britten's conscious decision to shift the original time frame underlines their concern about the social issues which occurred around the 1830s. The Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834 not only intended to regulate the treatment of the poor but was also designed to discourage people from falling into this unfortunate social category. However, because of anomalies in the law, there were many cases of the workhouse poor being abused by their guardians. The librettist reflects this problem through Grimes' brutal treatments of his apprentices.

The 2004 Covent Garden production commenced with the protagonist carrying a boy's coffin, mournfully walking across the front of the stage, to await the commencement of the public investigation.[106] By presenting the grim image of the hero's burden and suffering consequent upon the death of his apprentice, the production consciously underlined the impact of the loss of William Spode, not only on the mental state of the hero but also its direct association with the villagers' opinion of the doomed protagonist.[107] Grimes' abiding problem is that his blueprint for an ideal future is arguably too grand for him to achieve single handed and he needs the help of apprentices and vaguely hopes they would also comprehend his

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[102] Peter Grimes, act I scene i.
[103] See Edmund Wilson, "An account of 'Peter Grimes' from 'London in Midsummer'" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 159-162.
[104] See Philip Brett, "'Peter Grimes' on stage" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p. 97-100.
[105] See Hans Keller, "Peter Grimes: the story, the music not excluded" in *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes* ed. by Philip Brett, p.106 and 115-116.
[106] See The Royal Opera House Programme for *Peter Grimes* 2003-2004, p. 8-10.
[107] See Adrian Mourby, "A Stranger in These Parts" in The Royal Opera House Programme for *Peter Grimes* 2003-2004, p. 13-15.

aspirations and work collaboratively to achieve a shared ambition.[108] Because the protagonist perceives his apprentice and himself as forming a single entity for their project, the seemingly unjust physical and mental abuse that the boys suffer at his hands are obvious in the eyes of others, but to Grimes he was merely pushing his apprentices to work hard to achieve the final aim.

The Borough residences refuse to accept Grimes as part of their community because of the deaths of his apprentices.[109] As the public rumours and pressure against the protagonist's conduct reach an unbearable level, even Ellen and Balstrode cannot escape from the communal scrutiny, because of their kind support of the hero.[110] It is time for Grimes to fulfil the outsider's final function. He has at last realised the impossibility of achieving his dream and Balstrode's advice to sail away from the village never to return is accepted without argument. Grimes' final gesture resembles the "scapegoat" in the book of Leviticus.

> But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness.[111]

The protagonist is fully aware that the captain's suggestion, to "sink the boat" not only implies the literal destruction of the vessel, together with the hero's livelihood but also indicates the eradication of Grimes' desire, and, ultimately, of his life for the harmony of the Borough.[112]

III. Lawless Frenzy

In *Peter Grimes*, the central character's eventual submersion, has finally brought about the Borough's much anticipated calmness. The concept of human sacrifice receives further elaboration in W. H. Auden, Chester Kallman and Hans Werner Henze's second collaboration, *The Bassarids* (1966). The opera is based upon the ancient religious idea of such ritualistic offering: that only through this

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[108] See P. J. White, "Working Children" in The Royal Opera House Programme for *Peter Grimes* 2003-2004, p. 17-19.
[109] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten; Expression and Evasion*, p. 50-53.
[110] See Stephen Arthur Allen, "'He descended into Hell': Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 91-92.
[111] See Leviticus, 16: 10.
[112] See Peter Garvie, "Plausible darkness: '*Peter Grimes*' after a quarter of a century" in *Cambridge*

savage sacrifice would the people be able to quench the seething Dionysus.[113] In *The Bassarids*, the city of Thebes is suffering under Pentheus' tyranny and its citizens are longing for spiritual renewal. Furthermore, Pentheus' renunciation of sexual desire has not only frustrated his citizens' fundamental need for sexual gratification but also has, more seriously, denied the necessity of human reproduction. In this tense atmosphere, the Dionysian cult presents itself as the fulfilment of the Thebans' need. For Dionysus and his followers, the very purpose of Pentheus' existence has been lost and it has become legitimate to kill him as a sacrifice to the newly arrived god.

Inspired by Euripides' *The Bacchae*, this twentieth-century operatic adaptation presents a sharp contrast with its Ancient Greek predecessor in dealing with the Theban myth. Euripides' version depicts the Greeks as living in a mysterious world which is subject to the arbitrary intervention of a disparate and warring collection of Gods. It is an aspect of this religion that these gods have to be propitiated constantly or they will do terrible things as punishments. They may do terrible things anyway as a result of their own internal conflicts, but little can be done about that. On the other hand, in the mid-twentieth century, there is a view that world has been "understood and controlled" and the gods have been in consequence interiorised to signify various aspects of humanity. It is now humans who are ungovernably cruel and arbitrary; the gods as actual presences have receded to the point of extinction. Plays/operas from within this viewpoint are no longer not acts of piety or ritual in the old sense, but explorations of the remaining areas of mystery – mostly those connected with the human psyche. However, knowledge and command of nature have not led to a similar control of human kind – indeed the more that is discovered about humans the more fractured, alienated and incoherent they seem. The final scene in *The Bassarids* will present a worrying illustration of this lack of control among the human characters in the opera.

Theatre was one of the most important communal activities for the major polis in the ancient Greek period, especially in classical Athens.[114] Those performed theatrical works were consciously written with the purpose of forging and reinforcing the Athenians' sense of citizenship.[115] According to Paul Cartledge, "the festivals

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Opera Handbooks: Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes ed. by Philip Brett, p. 178-179.

[113] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) p. 96.

[114] See Richard Green and Eric Handley, *Images of the Greek Theatre* (London: The British Museum press, 1995) p. 30-34.

[115] According to Paul Cartledge's study, "tragedy, rather, was itself an active ingredient, and a major

were […] religious and political, or rather political because they were religious, since in ancient pre-Christian Greece the religious and the political were fabrics of thought and behaviour woven from the same threads. Thus they, and the play-festivals of Dionysus not least among them, served further as a device for defining Athenian civic identity, which meant exploring and confirming but also questioning what it was to be a citizen of a democracy, this brand-new form of popular self-government." [116] Moreover, the ancient Athenian tragedies also provided the polis with a public forum for political debates on controversial issues such as the definition of a true Athenian citizen and man's relationship with the gods. The ancient Athenian tragedians were considered as community teachers and furthermore, they were expected to provide a unified ethical understanding of the subject of the performance.[117] Every year in mid-spring, the Athenian tragedies were staged as part of a religious and ritualistic festival, Dionysia, in order to pay homage to the god of liberty, Dionysus.[118] Cartledge further notes "during the Dionysia, indeed, no effort was spared to impress on all participants, Athenian or foreign, from the outset that this was a ritual of the city as a city: not only through the prior strictly religious ceremonies of procession and sacrifice but also through the more narrowly political ceremonies performed within the theatre, before the plays begin."[119]

In Euripides' *The Bacchae*, the dramatic theme is focused upon Dionysus' avenging response to his oblivious family members. The young god's sacred power soon meets strong resistance from the monarchical influence which is represented by Pentheus. Euripides' tragedy captures the fatal clash between Pentheus, the king of Thebes and Dionysus, a newly arrived deity in Mount Olympus.[120] As the ruler of Thebes, Pentheus intends to implement a rational world order in his already myth-laden state. As a result, when the Dionysian cult overwhelmingly captivates the Theban citizens, Pentheus is outraged and determines to bring the cult under his state control.

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one, of the political foreground, featuring in the everyday consciousness and even the nocturnal dreams of the Athenian citizen." Paul Cartledge, "'Deep plays': theatre as process in Greek civic life" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 3.

[116] Ibid. p. 6.

[117] See J. R. Green, *Theatre in Ancient Greek Society* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 7-9.

[118] See Richard Green and Eric Handley, *Images of the Greek Theatre*, p. 30-34.

[119] See Paul Cartledge, "'Deep plays': theatre as process in Greek civic life", in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 19.

[120] See Peter Burian, "Myth into *muthos*: the shaping of tragic plot" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 197-198.

> PENTHEUS
> That effeminate foreigner, who plagues our women with
> This new disease, fouls the whole land with lechery;
> And once you catch him, tie him up and bring him here
> To me; I'll deal with him. He shall be stoned to death.
> He'll wish he'd never brought his Bacchic rites to Thebes.[121]

The passage not only illustrates Pentheus' determination to crush the new cult and its celebration of human irrationality but also demonstrates a key element in Greek drama: the association between civic degeneration and disorder, resulting from contact with the reportedly Eastern deities.

In *The Bacchae*, Pentheus condemns Dionysus for his "foreign" cult which has captivated the Theban citizens and resulted in their participating in savage and outrageous behaviour.[122] Dramatically, the king actively denies the fact that Dionysus did in fact originate from the house of Thebes itself. Ironically, because the young deity is the offspring of Pentheus' aunt Semele and the Olympian god, Zeus, the Theban king is in fact a cousin of Dionysus.[123] According to Philip Vellacott's study:

> Throughout the [play] the verb 'to show', and its correlatives 'to recognise' and 'to understand', are constantly repeated. And two distinct processes are implied: first, the acknowledgement of Dionysus' existence as a divinity; and secondly the understanding of the potential nature of this divinity – of the lawless and pitiless cruelty latent in human nature, which may be liberated when man's 'rational' part labours to produce violence rather than gentleness, organizes war instead of peace."[124]

Thus, the king is not really rejecting the wretched foreign influence but refusing to recognise the people's basic need to find temporary relief from the restraints of their urban society.[125] Pentheus is fighting a losing battle against a basic urge to be found

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[121] See Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, trans. by Philip Vellacott, p. 203.
[122] See P. E. Easterling, "A Show for Dionysus" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Easterling, p. 47-48.
[123] See W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, "Auden and Kallman's Program Notes" in *W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman: Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden* , ed. by Edward Mendelson, p. 697.
[124] Philip Wellacott, "Introduction" in Euripides' *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, trans. by Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin Books, 1973) p. 34.
[125] See J. R. Green, *Theatre in Ancient Greek Society*, p. 47.

lying within human nature, which, in Euripides' tragedy, is embodied in the god, Dionysus.[126]

Although *The Bassarids* is derived from Euripides' *The Bacchae*, the librettists took the liberty of re-structuring the play. Firstly, the they omitted the entire prologue which is spoken by Dionysus in the original. The decision conforms to modern notions about the creation of dramatic tension within a plot and allows the librettists and the composer to direct the audience's attention to the dramatic climax as Pentheus is torn into pieces by the maenads. The insertion of the intermezzo into the middle of the opera is Auden and Kallman's device to allow for the musical interlude which not only successfully bridges the gap between ancient Greek theatre and twentieth-century opera but it also enacts and foretells crucial dramatic elements in this highly complex mythic narrative. The creation of characters such as Autonoe, Beroe and Captain of the guard flesh out the cast's characters and allow the librettists an effective portrayal of the domestic response within the King's own household to the arrival of the new cult in the centre of the Theban court. The Captain in *The Bassarids* also takes over the theatrical function of messenger in Euripides' original. Beroe, once the nurse of Semele, becomes the dramatic means of connecting the death of Semele to the arrival of her son, Dionysus. Her presence is a strong reminder to the audience that the current chaos is the consequence of a tragic past. Agave in the opera has also been given a much more prominent part than in Euripides' original. Through a fuller treatment of the Theban queen, the librettists can present the catastrophic religious swing from the traditional broad-church polytheism to the newly arrived and violent Dionysian cult. As the opera begins, Agave simply despises the Dionysian cult as she has largely lost her faith in any form of religion. However, in the course of the action the Theban queen is charmed by the stranger's voice and eventually surrenders herself so completely to the new cult she frenziedly butchers her own son, Pentheus, as a Dionysian sacrificial victim. Auden reflects:

> Today we know only too well that it is as possible for whole communities to become demonically possessed as it is for individuals to go off their heads. Further, what the psychologists have taught us about repression and its damaging, sometimes fatal, effects makes us look at Sarastro with a more critical eye. Like Pentheus when

[126] See Froma I. Zeitlin, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama" in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?: Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* ed. by John J. Winkler and

> confronted by the cult of Dionysus, Sarastro's only idea of how to deal with the Queen of the Night, is to use force, magical in his case, and banish her to the underworld.[127]

Indeed, Auden and Kallman's idea about the confrontation between order and chaos, which features prominently in *The Bassarids,* is directly derived from their interpretation of Mozart and Schikaneder's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791). The librettists translated the German opera and adapted the work into a conflict between Sarastro and the Queen of the Night with Sarastro as the embodiment of reason and light and the Queen as representing chaos and darkness. It is Sarastro, the incarnation of order and reason, who eventually wins the battle. The character announces:

> Now my task is almost done;
> When tomorrow's rising sun
> Sees the Queen of the Night's defeat
> Shall my mission be complete,
> And in that victorious hour
> I must also lose my power,
> Gratefully my throne resign
> To a happier strength than mine.[128]

The defeat of the Queen of the Night symbolises the final victory for order and reason. However, as Sarastro enjoys his ultimate triumph, he also has to sacrifice his throne in order to pave the way for a new era. It would seem that the union between Tamino and Pamina can only be achieved by the defeat of the Queen of the Night and the self sacrifice of Sarastro. Pentheus, however, presents a darker aspect of reason and order, just as Dionysus brings worries about the values of instinctual freedom.

The Bassarids evokes a discussion about truth and the value of myth. The opera is associated with the founding narrative of Thebes in which the descriptions of several characters are derived from surreal circumstances. For example, Echion the father of Pentheus, sprang out of the tooth of the dragon which Cadmus had slain before establishing Thebes; Tiresias is in a bi-sexual existence. Obviously, neither character inhabits our "real" world. However, in a mythic narrative they are not only exist in the everyday sense but may also embody allegoric meanings such as bravery, loyalty and experience. Mythic narrative gives poets the licence to create deceptions,

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Froma I. Zeitlin, p. 77-78.

[127]. W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds*, p. 96.

[128] See W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Libretti: and other Dramatic writings by W. H. Auden,*

illusion and mental delusions. Because of these frankly remote connections with reality, such a narrative allows the poet to point his audience towards truths that he intends to present and explore which may transcend the merely naturalistic or commonplace. In order to fully understand the complete meaning of a myth, a reader should carefully decode the complexity of such narrative and avoid jumping to the banal interpretations of moral fable. Auden and Kallman deliberately create anachronistic elements in the opera to suggest the timelessness of their subject. *The Bassarids* is not just a re-working of classic myth but "projects the countercultural ideals of the sixties onto the operatic stage." As Bokina notes, the piece fully explores the relationships between men and gods, a monarch with his subjects, mother and son, the social status between men and women, aesthetic and religious rivalry between two cults, *mythos* against *logos* and finally human instinct versus rationality.[129]

Pentheus and Dionysus are representative of two contrasting human senses: while Pentheus is a symbol of the sense of reason and social hierarchy, the Olympian god is an embodiment of human instinct and subconscious sensuality.[130] The portrayal of the over-obsessive Pentheus makes a direct link between his belief in reason and social order and his own emotional and sexual immaturity.[131] In the opera, as the patriarch, both of the state and of his family, the king vows to terminate the Bacchanal cult and further underlines his personal chastity.

> I, Pentheus,
> King of Thebes,
> Henceforth will abstain
> From wine, from meats
> And from women's bed,
> Live sober and chaste
> Till the day I die![132]

1939-1973, ed. by Edward Mendelson, p. 170.

[129] See John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze* (London: Yale University Press, 1997)

[130] See ibid. p. 183-186.

[131] See ibid. p.179-180

[132] *The Bassarids*, the second movement. The opera is written in one act. However, the composer further adopts the symphonic structure for the work and the act is set out in four interconnected movements. See Andrew Clement, "*The Bassarids*" in *The New Grove Book of Operas* ed. by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1996) p. 70-72.

The passage clearly demonstrates the character's personality. The librettists begin Pentheus' vow, with the character's declamation of his place in society. As the "King of Thebes", Pentheus fully recognises his duty and intends to set an example for his citizens to resist sensual temptations such as "wine", "meat" and "women's bed". For the king, having a virtuous life and staying "sober" and "chaste" is the benchmark for the life of a Theban citizen. To quote John Bokina's study, "psychologically, Pentheus uses his 'higher' reason to repress the 'lower' sensuous and passionate aspects of his character; indeed, his identity is predicated on this repression. His first appearance in the opera is delayed until the end of the first movement by an exercise in abstinence."[133]

But the librettists also reflect Pentheus' immaturity through the image of a child with her doll. Growing up without a father figure, Pentheus is desperately in need of a male role model to look up to. However, the Theban court has been dominated by the matriarch, the queen Agave during Pentheus' adolescent phase. Even though the Theban king begins to impose extreme sanctions to banish the Dionysian cult in order to demonstrate his patriarchal authority, Pentheus is still a child who requires maternal protection and attention. The girl with "an enormous realistic doll" symbolises Pentheus' insecurity. The only way for Pentheus to reach his full maturity, according to the librettists' stage instruction for the final scene is to abandon his dependence on the matriarchal figure, the doll. However, in the plot both of the opera and its Greek original, the stubborn character of the Theban king will eventually consume his life. The child and her doll in the final scene also stand for Dionysus and his chilling revenge for his mother's untimely death. As the fertility idols rise at the back of the set, the spirit of Semele is therefore symbolically reborn and ascends into the realm of celestial beings. Dionysus can therefore surrender his reliance upon the doll and close a chapter of domestic dispute within the Theban ruling family. At the beginning of the opera, the librettists creatively amplify Euripedes' original in order to suit an operatic narrative. However, as the opera reaches its final scene, Auden and Kallman follow their source increasingly carefully until the final moment approaches, when the librettists create a scenic spectacle of the resurrection of a new goddess, Thyone who, after the fatal conflict of reason and instinct, represents a new, ambiguous beginning in the ashes of Thebes. This re-

[133] John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze*, p. 183.

creating of a mythic narrative for a twentieth-century audience carries with it strong echoes of a calamitous recent history.

The obsession with "rationality" which grips Pentheus, has gradually turned the seemingly composed and just sovereign into a demented tyrant.[134] The king's inability to understand the social and religious needs of his people for the Dionysian cult, has finally led to his downfall. At the end of the second movement of the opus, the Theban king finally encounters a young foreigner who appears to be a priest of the new cult. Pentheus then immediately attempts to impose his power on the young man.

> Slave, bow to Pentheus, son of Echion, King of Thebes,
> Whose deeds obey the Truth he seeks. Answer as truly
> *Your* name, parentage, land, and how you found *your* … God.[135]

The passage re-confirms Pentheus' rigid character as an uncompromising and defensive ruler. The king only recognises the "Truth", the established order in nature, and opposes any novel trend, which he believes to be emerging from the decadent eastern region. The young stranger, however, is Dionysus in disguise and the young god is prepared to confront this hubristic king and demonstrate his own divinity.

The appearance of Dionysus in the Theban court not only culminates in the struggle between the monarch and the young god, but it also mysteriously awakens a dormant sexuality which is latent within Pentheus[136]. During the questioning of the stranger, the ascetic king becomes fully aware of the young man's physical allure as he recognises Dionysus' "perfumed hair", "smiling mouth" and "pampered flesh". Furthermore, although the king initially rejects the idea of dressing in women's clothes in order to observe the Bacchant ritual, ultimately he becomes tempted to experience his first and last cross-dressing, in order to join those maenads.[137] Bokina further argues, "Pentheus' quintessential masculinity not only prescribes the struggle against the predominantly female Bassarids but is also manifested in his hostility to the sexual ambivalence and ambiguity of Tiresias and Dionysus. But the intensification of Dionysus's spell over Pentheus triggers the release of Pentheus's repressed sexuality, and the event reveals some surprises. Beneath Pentheus's

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[134] Ibid, p. 180.
[135] *The Bassarids*, the second movement.
[136] See Peter Burian, "Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. by P. E Easterling, p. 269.
[137] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary World*, p. 99-102.

apparently unassailable masculinity and heterosexuality lay several repressed dimensions: homosexuality, or bisexuality; transvestism; and exhibitionism."[138]

Pentheus' sexual repression can be directly associated with his neurotic anxiety concerning the Dionysian cult.[139] Freud's theories about sexual identity provide some explanation for the Theban king's extreme reaction to the controversial religious movement:

> It is easy to recognise that sexual restriction goes hand in hand with some kind of anxiousness and hesitancy, while intrepidity and impudent daring bring along with them a free indulgence of sexual needs. However much these relations are altered and complicated by a variety of cultural influences, it nevertheless remains true of the average of mankind that anxiety has a close connection with sexual limitation.[140]

Pentheus' refusal to balance his strenuous sense of reason with his instinctive urge for sexual satisfaction, therefore, has ultimately led to his surrendering to the temptation of Dionysus and his own terrible death.[141] The intermezzo begins with Dionysus holding a mirror and inviting Pentheus to look into its reflection. The mirror not only reveals Agave and Autonoe's flirtatious conduct with the captain in defiance of the king's autocracy but also foretells the Theban king's inevitable downfall through the myth of "The Judgement of Calliope". Like Adonis, who is the object of the bitter argument between Aphrodite and Persephone, Pentheus is a sacrificial victim for an everlasting conflict between Apollo and Dionysus. Pentheus' strict adherence to the Apollonian cult in denying human emotions and intuitions has led him to be inexperienced in love. But instead of achieving maturity through love, Pentheus is required to die, as rashly denying Aphrodite, he finds that he has by default chosen Persephone.

When compared with their passive dramatic function in *The Bacchae*, it is clear that women are given a more assertive role in its twentieth-century adaptation.

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[138] John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze*, p. 187-188.

[139] See second movement of *The Bassarids*, "Pentheus. Enough We are/ Not finished yet. First, Captain, take my mother back/ To her quarters with her sister. Lock them in. / Then … You, Tiresias. I set you free. Your trade/ In prophecy, however, has been Thebes' disgrace/ Too long. So. Captain, you will take four men. You task: / Pull down his house. Let no one take him in. Go." See W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman: Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden* , ed. by Edward Mendelson, p. 278.

[140] See Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis*, trans. by James Strachey, vol. I (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976) p. 451.

[141] See John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze*, p. 186-187.

Not only do the librettists increase the word count for Agave, they also feature Autonoe and Beroe in the opera in order to channel the Greek tragedy into the narrative conventions of a twentieth-century opera. The genre of music theatre is always fascinated by female characters and their dramatic function serves almost as an index of period. By giving Agave and Autonoe an active role, the librettists are not only able to rescue female characters' social position from the obliviousness of Ancient Greek society but also adapt their dramatic characterisation to act as a crucial force throughout the entire plot. In an ancient society, official killing is the business of men either in war or in the administration of justice. However, women in *The Bassarids* ascend from being socially inferior as is found in the original play, to an active force throughout the entire drama. Throughout the opera the serious killing is done by women - obviously as is seen in the work of the maenads but also through the trickery of Hera prior to the play. The active role allocated to women in the opera also indicates the significance of reverse identities throughout the entire plot. In the beginning of the opera, the androgynous Dionysus is unsuccessfully hunted by the rigidly puritanical Pentheus. However, this hunter and prey relationship changes radically when Pentheus dresses himself as a woman to spy on the cult ritual only to be mercilessly killed by the maenads. In *The Bassarids*, the conventional social and domestic relationships between human beings are seriously challenged as women hunt men, mothers kill children and old men dance to the Bacchic drum. Through this emphasising of reversed identities the librettists are able to create an ironic subtext to Euripides' original and to update the drama into the twentieth-century mentality. Women are found to have roles other than those of passive victim of demented maenad.

The theme of Auden and Kallman's libretto is an exploration of the mysterious human psyche. Whatever we may feel we have achieved in terms of knowledge and the ability to command nature, this has not yet led to a similar control of human kind – indeed the more that is discovered about humans the more fractured, alienated and incoherent they seem.. In *The Bassarids*, the death of Pentheus takes the form of human sacrifice in order to quench the anger of the new Olympian god, Dionysus. The death of the Theban king can also be seen as the ultimate punishment for his stubbornness in not recognising not only his own needs but also the need of his

subjects' for physical sensual pleasure.[142] However, as the final movement of the opera gradually unfolds, the consequence of carnality superseding rationality is shown as resulting in complete anarchy. While the death of Pentheus has marked the end of the hyper-rational epoch in Thebes, it has also directly led to lawlessness within Theban society and its eventual dissolution. The intoxicated bassarids are completely under the spell of the young god's influence while the ritualistic killing of Pentheus takes place.

> We heard nothing. We saw nothing.
> We took no part in her [Agave's] lawless frenzy,
> We had no share in his bloody death.
> We heard nothing. We saw nothing.
> We were far away on the lonely mountain
> Dancing in innocent joy.[143]

The passage clearly depicts the mental state of the bassarids after the slaying of Pentheus. The frenzied repetition of the first person plural "we", implies that the Theban citizens have been hypnotised during the practice of the Dionysian ritual and that they have been transformed into a destructive mass. Moreover, the bassarids are united into one single voice by the librettists' repetition not only of the word "we" but also of phrases such as "we heard nothing" and "we saw nothing". In the stanza, the Theban citizens have lost their individuality and their behaviour has been solely dictated by their god. Furthermore, by the repetition of "no" and "nothing", the librettists demonstrate an enormous negative energy from the destructive bassarids. Their indifference has totally ignored Pentheus' desperate plea for his life. In the last movement of the piece, the catastrophic consequence of overwhelming sensual abandonment on Thebes is fully demonstrated not only through the destruction of Thebes but by the entire community cringing before the idols of Dionysus and Semele-Thyone.[144] The final scene in the opera presents a worrying consequence of this lack of balance and control among human characters, and not just in the opera.

Quite apart from the dramatic realisation which Auden and Kallman achieved in this the libretto, *The Bassarids* proves to be a twentieth century masterpiece, which re-appropriates the atmosphere of ancient Greek drama, namely the element of festive

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[142] See Froma I. Zeitlin, "Dionysus in 69" in *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, ed. by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley, p.70-72.
[143] *The Bassarids*, fourth movement.
[144] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds*, p. 101.

celebration.[145] The opera was commissioned and especially designed for the Salzburg Festival in 1966; the collaboration between the librettists and the composer, fully responded to this occasion with this re-interpretation of the Greek tragedy.[146] The opera's festive element can be read as a direct link to one of the most important Athenian festivals, the Dionysia. Athens held two festivals every year, namely, the Lenaia and the Dionysia, at which Dionysus was honoured by the presentation of plays. These were public holidays and every citizen's presence was mandatory. Either Dionysus himself or his priest presided over these Athenian events. It would seem, therefore, that Bacchus's greatest contribution to human civilisation would be the genesis of European drama, which originated from his legends and festivals.[147]

By reviving the ancient Athenian festive spirit, *The Bassarids* not only celebrates the contribution towards music and drama in western civilisation made by Dionysus, but the opera is also designed, like its ancient Greek counterparts, to reflect the society which they live in.[148] While *The Bacchae* rationalises Dionysus' catastrophic punishment of the city of Thebes, *The Bassarids* focuses on the terrors of the human psyche as so recently manifested in the Second World War. Auden, Kallman and Henze's collaboration is "a genuine Festival Opera"[149] in which by transforming an ancient religious ritual, the librettists and the composer have achieved their aim of not only entertaining and enlightening their twentieth century audience but also up-dating such mythic narrative to echo the profound troubles of twentieth-century society.

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[145] See Edward Mendelson, "The Bassarids: 1. History, Authorship, Text, and Editions" in *W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman: Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden* , ed. by Edward Mendelson, p.683.

[146] Ibid, p. 705-707.

[147] Andrew Dalby, *Bacchus: A Biography* (London: The British Museum Press, 2003) p. 138-139.

[148] See Simon Goldhill, "Modern critical approaches to Greek Tragedy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. by P. E Easterling, p. 342.

[149] "In One Word: A Genuine Festival Opera", ed. by Christiane Delank in the booklet of the recording of *Die Bassariden*, Orfeo D'Or C 605 0321.

3

Worse Things

I. Sheltered Beauty; Sheltered Lives

> Tutto questo avverrà, te lo prometto.
> Tienti la tua paura – io son sicura
> Fede l'aspetto.[1]

In Guiseppe Giacosa, Luigi Illica and Giacomo Puccini's "tragedia japponese", *Madama Butterfly* (1904), the audience is presented with a theatrical portrayal of an innocent young oriental woman who is betrayed. Because Cio-Cio-San firmly believes that her American husband Pinkerton will ultimately return to be reunited with her, she steadfastly refuses to believe any indication that her husband could have intended that he was entering a sham marriage. After Butterfly pours scorn over Prince Yamadori's genuine proposal of marriage, the tragic conclusion of the opera is therefore unavoidable. She finally realizes Pinkerton's new marital status and as the heroine's world completely shatters, Cio-Cio-San decides to end her suffering by committing the ultimate Japanese sacrificial ritual, "seppuku" and dies with honour. Thus Butterfly inherited not only the sacrificial weapon, but also her fate.

In *Madama Butterfly*, the librettists not only make use of an oriental setting but also feature a Japanese woman who fits the clichéd occidental image of a loyal, innocent and graceful character, in order to locate the action in a familiar space for its first European audience. Lehmann reflects, "exoticism inevitably conjures up images of sensuality […] the *veni-vidi-vici* theme of Western boy meets Japanese girl was taken up by many writers of the day – and, over the decades, it became the most

[1] Act II of Guiseppe Giacosa, Luigi Illica and Giacomo Puccini's Madama Butterfly. English translation, "This will all come to pass, of that I'm certain. / Banish your idle fears, for he will/ Return, I know." By R. H. Elkin in *English National Opera Guide: Madam Butterfly*, ed. Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1984) p. 99

popular one."[2] Pinkerton is presented as the prototype of the Western explorer who imposes his cultural expectations on his Japanese "wife" who is supposed to be an emotionally fragile and physically delicate creature. Furthermore, by highlighting Cio-Cio-San's steadfast loyalty to her husband, the opera also reinforces the role of women in society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries By setting the opera in the Far East, the composer and the librettist therefore have given themselves the license to incorporate the European audience's expectations into their narrative.

The theme of the interiorisation of women's social and emotional needs is the main subject of Samuel Barber and Gian-Carlo Menotti's only collaboration, *Vanessa*. The work became one of the most highly anticipated American works prior to its successful premier at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York on 23 January 1958.[3] Distantly inspired by Isak Dinesen's (Karen Blixen) "The Old Chevalier" from her *Seven Gothic Tales*, this American opera is written in the conventional European "grand opera" style.[4] As Barbara B. Heyman suggests, "*Vanessa* does epitomize the conventional lyrical style of late nineteen- and early twentieth-century Romantic operas; but while its models derive from Verdi, Puccini, and Strauss, the musical ideas are always on Barber's own terms."[5] Not only the musical style but also the literary manner in *Vanessa* can be seen to have been influenced by its European antecedents.

Like *Madama Butterfly*, the theme of a heroine desperately expecting the return of her lover has formed the basic dramatic structure for *Vanessa*. Both works emphasise the nineteenth-century idea of the passivity of female characters and of their social function and continue them into the literary expectations of twentieth-century society. In both operas, the only occupation for the heroines is simply awaiting the reappearance of their long lost lovers. They have been removed from any significant social obligations. The music in both works also reflects this nineteenth century view with an abundance of high romanticism in the music structure. By creating a myth surrounding the subject of the emotional dependency of women, Barber and Menotti are leaning heavily on the nineteenth-century's view of

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[2] See Jean Pierre Lehmann, "Images of the Orient" in *English National Opera Guide: Madama Butterfly*, ed. Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1984) p. 8

[3] See Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 393.

[4] Ibid, p. 379.

[5] Ibid, p. 391.

women and this will raise some interesting questions about expressive functions and audience-expectation in the twentieth-century.

In romantic literary portrayals, the main role in life for young upper-middle class women in the nineteenth-century was to marry well, or at least usefully. Once they had achieved this and found a suitable husband, their initial mission in life was accomplished and their individual personalities could henceforth be subsumed in those of their husbands. Significantly, their lives would lack plot and they would be portrayed as leading a rather monotonous domestic life. This social phenomenon is well reflected in Jane Austen's works in which all the narratives are structured by the search for an ideal husband and conclude with happy marriages – there are no plots about married life, apart from the splendid Mrs Croft. It appears to be that a woman's life ceases to be appealing as the centre of narrative after they are married. Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* presents a terrifying account of the banality and emptiness for nineteenth-century women after entering wedlock. In order to escape from domestic boredom, Emma Bovary reads romances, albeit uncritically, and deludes herself into thinking that she might live like a romantic heroine. However, as her illusionary world collapses, Emma decides to end her life as a "noble" heroine and commit suicide. The female characters in *Vanessa* re-capture this nineteenth-century social phenomenon in that they all apparently just sit around the remote mansion years after year without seeming to do much. Whereas Emma Bovary at least seeks her illusionary life style, Vanessa and Erika submissively wait for the right person to come along. Even in a conservative-twentieth century society this presents problems concerning narrative motivation and whether these can be side-stepped by the invocation of a non-realistic genre remains to be seen.

Vanessa is set in an unspecified Northern European country during the winter. The librettist deliberately uses the gothic elements to evoke not only a sense of romance but also an impression of unattainability throughout the narrative. The never ceasing snow and the coldness in the story also symbolise the heroine's emotion which has been frozen in a time capsule since her lover's untimely departure. The dinner scene, which opens the opera, represents a daily routine of the household and captures not only the opulence of the family but also a sense of stillness indicating that little has changed for quite some time. The first scene establishes the relationship between the three female characters: Vanessa is agitatedly waiting for her lover, Erika is collectedly carrying on her daily routine and looking after her aunt while the

Baroness' indifference and silence to the heroine are her strong protest against Vanessa's irrational behaviours. The arrival of a stranger suddenly awakens the heroine's emotions as she believes that he is her lover, Anatol. In fact, the stranger's name is Anatol – not the heroine's bygone lover but his son.

Anatol's startling presence appears to bring the heroine's household "alive" again. However, in the second scene the librettist also indicates the young hero's facile character and this creates a variation on a nineteenth-century romantic story. Anatol not only has successfully seduced Erika on the day of his arrival but has also managed to manipulate Vanessa into believing that she is in love again - with him. The hero's fluid character arouses the Baroness' strong suspicion as to his motives but she nevertheless strongly urges Erika to be more assertive in her own interest. But after hearing Anatol's easy-going attitude to love, Erika realises that he is not as committed to her as she is to him and decides to give him up on behalf of her aunt, even though she is already pregnant by him. The second act further expands on the relation between Vanessa and Anatol with the announcement of their engagement. The seemingly ritualistic declaration of love in the act is strangely muddled with an unlikely love duet.

> ANATOL
> Love has a bitter core, Vanessa.
> Do not taste too deep.
> Do not search into the past.
> He who hungers for the past will be fed on lies.
> VANESSA
> Love has a bitter core, Anatol,
> but let me taste this bitterness with you.
> I shall never take too much
> if you will offer all.[6]

The passage reveals the characters' different outlooks on their love affair. Anatol is quite bluntly telling Vanessa that his love is most likely to be insincere. However, the heroine still enthusiastically welcomes his love for her and expresses her willingness to suffer the consequences. The librettist is using Anatol and Vanessa's romantic proclamation to express a cynical view on the true motives within a conventional relationship. Furthermore, the ceremonial atmosphere for the scene is marred by the

[6] See *Vanessa*, act II.

absence of Erika. The heroine's niece is heartbroken by Anatol's betrayal and she dashes out into the snowy evening, murmuring that Anatol's child "must not be born".

The first scene in act three is set in Erika's bedroom, a couple of hours after the engagement party. Even though the girl has been rescued by Anatol by being pulled out of a snow-drift and has suffered a miscarriage, Vanessa is tormented by the possibility that Erika is actually in love with Anatol. Vanessa demands an explanation from Anatol as to why her niece went out but Anatol's evasive response allows the heroine to believe he really loves her. As the scene comes to an end, Erika finally tells her grandmother that she miscarried on the night of Vanessa's engagement. Astounded by Erika's conduct, the baroness turns her back on Erika and abandons her just as she did Vanessa. The final scene contrasts Vanessa and Anatol's preparation for their departure for their life in Paris with Erika's solemn lament for the loss of her love and youth. The opera concludes with Erika's words, "Now it is my time to wait!"

The ending of the opera arouses a degree of puzzlement as to intentions. In the field of theatrical writing, the end usually goes some distance to defining the genre and confirming the audience's understanding of how they are expected to respond to the story. In this case, *Vanessa* concludes with the happy departure of the hero and the heroine, though whether we are meant to assume that Anatol and Vanessa will actually live happily ever after is something of a mystery. On the face of it, it seems improbable, calling into question any view of the opera as a conventional romance. Furthermore, although the opera is set during a three months winter period, the plot and scenery arrangements provide a static tone for its dramatic actions. Everything appears to happen within a short period of time – Anatol suddenly arrives, then he and Vanessa fall in love and not long after that they leave the house to live together. The compressed timeline in the opera is presumably intended to quell the audience's doubts on the psychological motivation for the characters. The gothic element in the opera further removes the plot from any realistic attachment and gives the opera a sense simultaneously of banal and mythic qualities. However, the final presentation of the piece is seriously marred by an apparent miscommunication between the librettist and the composer. It is clear from the music that, Barber intended to compose a romantic melodrama but he was a given a much darker anti-romantic story as the base of the libretto.

Of course, the above must be modified in that there is obviously an attempt to fit this up in mythic terms as a cyclic narrative, and by the invocation of Gothic form - which is intended to remove it from the framework of realist narrative (within which it would become merely ludicrous and unconvincing). It is one aspect of the "gothic" element is that any sense of the real outside world has virtually ceased to exist and that we are therefore to be more concerned with rather strange inner states than with anything that could be regarded as everyday reality. Vanessa's refusal to accept the elder Anatol's departure has caused her to preserve herself within a time capsule for the last twenty years, living in a house with all the mirrors covered and not speaking to her mother during the whole period. Erika, we are told, is Vanessa's niece – though what happened to Vanessa's sibling is not explained. That both Vanessa and Erika seem to have an inner need to sit around moping for years on end is odd enough – but odder (as it turns out) is that is doesn't seem to be based on any observationally convincing aspect of their psychologies. That is, they are responding to an impulse which is inner but not psychological in the sense of "Why did you do that?" – which is a question about identifiable (or even unconscious) motives. And it is this strange inner need that connects the narrative both to the gothic and the mythic. As the opera begins, it is a dark and stormy night. Not knowing that Anatol the son has used his father's signal, Vanessa's anticipation of her lover's return finally culminates in her extreme reaction on hearing of Anatol's arrival:

> Do not utter a word, Anatol,
> do not move;
> you may not wish to stay.
> For over twenty years
> in stillness, in silence,
> I have waited for you.[7]

The structure of *Vanessa* relies upon a cyclic narrative form in which the fate of the heroine will eventually pass on to her successor, Erika. Although the relationship between Vanessa and Erika is bound by blood, their parallel fates have added an element almost of the supernatural throughout the whole piece. Although fate casts a formidable shadow for the heroine and her niece, the librettist also provides a dramatic twist to amplify the elements of this seemingly gothic romance. Like the character of Rodolphe Boulanger in *Madame Bovary*, Anatol is not only

unconventional but also unsatisfactory as the hero of a romance. Even though he is naturally eager to meet the woman who "haunted" his family throughout his childhood, his actual intention and manner of the visit is something of a mystery. The baroness unreservedly speaks out her impression about the young Anatol.

> BARONESS
> but this Anatol, oh this cautious knight
> who entered our house like a thief,
> what kind of a man is he?[8]

The word "thief" combined with Anatol's sudden and peculiar appearance and behaviour suggests the character is better to be described as an opportunist than a romantic hero. Without his family (it is unclear what has happened to them, except that Anatol the elder has died) and being alone in the world, Vanessa's vast wealth represents the immediately obvious plausible attraction for Anatol's visit. Although Anatol's visit finally terminates Vanessa's solitary longing for her previous lover, the young man also awakens Erika's womanhood and inspires her to break away from being in her aunt's shadow. This takes the form of her getting drunk and allowing herself to be seduced by Anatol on the first night of his arrival.

> ANATOL
> Outside this house the world has changed.
> Time flies faster than before;
> there is no time for idle gestures.
> I cannot offer you eternal love
> for we have learned today such word are lies.
> But the brief pleasure of passion, yes,
> and sweet, long friendship.[9]

With her entire life entrenched in Vanessa's isolated mansion, Erika has obviously very little experience in interacting with others. The appearance of Anatol the son not only resuscitates Vanessa's unending aspiration for reunion with her past lover but also awakens Erika's femininity and her craving for love. For her, Anatol represents the freedom of the outside world. Erika finds Anatol irresistible and yields to temptation. Allured by Anatol's romantic talk, as illustrated above, Erika

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[7] Ibid, Act I scene i.
[8] See *Vanessa*, Act I scene ii.
[9] See *Vanessa*, Act I scene ii

unwittingly inherits Vanessa's fate and stays even more firmly under the shadow of her aunt.

The dramatic function of Anatol's character exposes an unexpected source of confusion in understanding the opera. Menotti's libretto clearly underlines the character's unreliability, as immediately announced by the Baroness. Although the Baroness does not have many lines to sing, her grim presence throughout the piece has made her an authoritative (if somewhat eccentric) witness to the Vanessa/Anatol/Erika love triangle. Her strong suspicion of Anatol's intentions behind the visit is the librettist's initial indication suggesting a dramatic twist on this seemingly romantic plot of lost love recovered. Menotti's intention of undermining the conventionalities of plot in gothic romance find further evidence in Vanessa and Anatol's love duet in the second act.

> ANATOL
> I did not ask for whom you were waiting
> that night when first we met.
> VANESSA
> For you, Anatol, for you.
> ANATOL
> Not, not for me, for I was born that night.[10]

Anatol clearly understands that it was not him that Vanessa is expecting, that it was in fact his father; in turn, Vanessa glosses over this detail in order to accept this specious declaration. The hero is merely an illusion of his father whom Vanessa in true Romantic fiction style dearly loved and can never forget. Nevertheless, with remarkable little effort, he beguiles the heroine into loving him and implores her to forget her painful past. Vanessa simply falls for this young re-embodiment of her former lover without questioning much about him. The heroine has been living in a delusional mental state since all she does in her desolated mansion is await the re-appearance of her Anatol. It is difficult to describe the exact tone of this libretto. At one level, through this unrealistic positioning of the main characters, the librettist intends that it should resemble something of a mythic narrative about a woman's steadfast virtue. On the other, there is a profoundly cynical strain running through the whole book. By employing gothic elements in the libretto, the librettist can transfer the plot from realism into the realm of fantasy, but quasi-realist considerations

[10] Ibid, Act II.

become insistent. Vanessa's hysterical response towards the appearance of young Anatol underlines Menotti's aim not only to establish the piece as a mythic fantasy but also to reflect the heroine's delusional state of mind. One might compare much of this to Proust where love is so tied up with illusion and self-projection that the old romantic myth can no longer survive. However, Barber's music does not fully correspond with Menotti's intention of creating a distinctly odd dramatic entanglement between Vanessa, Anatol and Erika. Furthermore, the composer does nothing to explore the caddishness in Anatol but simply depicts the character in the mode of a nineteenth-century romantic hero. It is typical of the score that the rich melodic lines in Vanessa and Anatol's love duet seem entirely without irony. Where the libretto has established dubiety or self-delusion, Barber's music persists in romanticising the plot as if it can be taken at face value. As a result, instead of composing the music for a gothic intrigue, the composer approaches the story as a piece of late romantic music theatre, such as Puccini's *Turandot*. The composer's aim in connecting the twentieth-century American opera with European traditions has led the piece to be criticised as being not "American" enough. But this rather misses the point. One should rather question whether the main situation is at all coherent. Perhaps the comment reflects the shortcomings of the piece in which the composer and the librettist were too eager to recall the operatic tradition of the previous century but neglected a chance to explore either the implications of its own materials or embark on a new direction for the genre of music theatre in the twentieth-century.

In the opera, the young Erika is presented as Vanessa's mirror image as she reflects, "sometimes I am her niece/ but mostly her shadow."[11] The young Anatol's appearance, therefore, initiates Erika's self-recognition. In the course of the piece the young lady has gradually evolved from a mere reflection of her aunt into a mature independent woman. However, in a re-enactment of the family fate, Erika, just like her aunt Vanessa before her, also chooses to sacrifice herself (and her child), in this case to deny a man whose integrity she no longer believes in – though the baroness thinks she should just get what she can. Rather she makes herself available for the hoped-for future appearance of some possible ideal love. Like the heroine, Erika has

[11] *Vanessa*, Act I scene i.

surrendered to her destiny, which is to await the arrival of her future lover, as she delivers the ultimate phrase of the opera, "now it is my turn to wait!"[12]

Although *Vanessa* did not succeed in captivating the Austrian critics at its European premiere at the Salzburg festival in 1958, Barber and Menotti's collaboration nevertheless won over its first European audience. To quote Henrik Kralik's review in *Die Presse* after *Vanessa*'s Salzburg performance, the critic declares the opera is "an opera for the public and not for the intellectuals."[13] As with gothic fiction itself, one of whose less respectable appeals is to nostalgia for an imagined aristocratic past, *Vanessa*'s targeted audience would be the social bourgeois. By drawing on an exotic and lavish European setting, the opera seems designed to capture middle class America's nostalgic fantasy concerning the old world. Along with Barber's music, Menotti's libretto achieved critical acclaim in the United States, as a journalist notes:

> Mr. Menotti's libretto is effective theatre, and by the time the composer has reached the fourth act he has conquered the problems of opera. He has educated himself en route, as it were, and the most significant lesson he has learned is that the surest way to reach the heart of the audience is to be true to his own deepest musical instincts.[14]

The combination of Vanessa's blind and self-deluding love for Anatol, Erika's naivety and the insincere and deceiving character of the hero, demonstrates Menotti's intention to create an ironic reading of conventional romance. Menotti was explicit in his writing of stage directions in the libretto, and this clearly represents an attempt to ensure that future productions would not distort his intentions and in this way reduce any misunderstanding by directors. Unfortunately he seems not to have told his composer. One can only conclude that the clash of words and music in Vanessa is due to Barber and Menotti's miscommunication or even an unintentional rivalry. (On various occasions Gian Carlo Menotti told the present author that he did this to try to ensure that his works would be presented in line with his intentions. He explained that like other composers he wrote the music to reflect the text and set the scene for the piece. He viewed certain "updated" productions of works to be abominations

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[12] Ibid, Act III scene ii.

[13] Its German original, "eine Oper furs Publikum und nicht für die Schriftgelehrten." Henrik Kralik, "Barbers 'Vanessa' – eine Konzession an das Publikum," *Die Presse*, 19 August 1958.

[14] *Vanessa* was originally written in four acts; See Taubman, "'Vanessa' at the 'Met,'" *New York Times*,

which destroyed the composers' intentions when the director ignored the text of the libretto.)

Menotti and Barber's *Vanessa* begins with the premise of the heroine's submissive mentality within a patriarchal society.[15] The work highlights the delicate balance between power relationships in a couple's emotional bond. Vanessa has the beauty and wealth but emotionally she needs a man in her life – despite waiting twenty years for that to happen. By featuring a heroine with extreme wealth and beauty, the librettist sets the opera in a fantasy world of unconstrained glamour without the awkwardness of real decision and action. In practice, however, the opera is vague in establishing its genre. Clearly the Gothic and melodramatic elements are supposed to remove this from grubby realism into the land of romantic myth. But there is no sign to indicate the type of myth the opera belongs to and it is notable that most myths do not involve quite so much swooning music. The characterization of the heroine does not give her any symbolic value nor succeed in portraying her even as the stereotype of the female self-sacrificial figure. Her initial renunciation of her happiness and youth looks more like extended pique than unfulfilled passion, and Vanessa eventually gains her "salvation" with Anatol junior who gives every indication of being profoundly untrustworthy. As the hero finally departs with his adroitly [re]claimed mistress, the music seems to endorse this improbable union of opportunism and self-delusion and *Vanessa* has managed to espouse the weakly conventional view of the female operatic character as passive receiver in a male dominated society.

II. Refulgent Games

Benjamin Britten and William Plomer's 1952 historical opera *Gloriana,* depicts a different kind of narrative focus on female character. In this piece, the queen is portrayed as actively participating in the construction of the national myth that, for its ultimate stability and benefit, she is married solely to her country.[16] The title of the opera is derived from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, an epic

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26 January 1958, sec. 2, p. 9

[15] See Dona Heiland, *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) p. 8-11.

[16] See Robert Hewison, "'Happy were He': Benjamin Britten and the *Gloriana* Story" in *Britten's Gloriana: Essays and Sources* ed. by Paul Banks (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1993) p. 1-16.

romance designed to honour the ruling monarch, namely Elizabeth I.

> Upon a great adventure he was bond,
> That greatest *Gloriana* to him gave,
> That greatest Glorious Queene of *Faerie* Lond,
> To winne him worship, and her grace to have,
> Which of all earthy things he most did crave; [17]

Just as Spenser intended his poem to be a glorification of Elizabeth I, Plomer and Britten's opera is a symbolic gesture to celebrate the forthcoming era under Elizabeth II's reign. The opera, first performed at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, was dedicated to the queen for her coronation ceremony.[18] The work depicts the latter days of her predecessor, Elizabeth I's long and successful reign and more importantly, it uses that narrative to signal the arrival of a new era.[19] Both the librettist and the composer intended to make a direct association between these two monarchs; Queen Elizabeth I, is not only presented as a model for the new queen but also embodies the characteristic of an operatic heroine who is willing to subjugate her private interests for the stability of her country and her subjects.[20]

Set during the final years of Elizabeth I's reign, Britten and Plomer open their three act opera with a tilting tournament, during which the Earl of Essex displays his jealousy while making remarks about the tournament winner Lord Mountjoy with whom he picks a fight - which is interrupted by the arrival of the queen. The scene immediately establishes a dramatic opening for the opera in that the rivalry between Essex and Mountjoy for the Queen's favour sets the tone for the theme of struggle for the Queen's favour, indicating that the opera intends to deal with the internal politics and the balance between different power-blocks during the closing years of the first Elizabethan era. However, Essex's public attack on and personal jealousy of Lord Mountjoy at the start appears to suggest that the bitter rivalry between these two courtiers is not merely simple political manoeuvring but rather part of a process of engaging the Queen's special interest. The following scene begins the portrayal of the Queen's affection towards the Earl. Because the opera is derived from Lytton

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[17] See *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, Canto I, verse iii. Edmund Spencer, *The Faerie Queene* (London: Penguin Books, 1988) p. 6.
[18] See Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004) p. 160.
[19] See Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) p. 190-201.
[20] See Donald Mitchell, "The paradox of Gloriana: simple and difficult" in *Britten's Gloriana: Essays and Sources* ed. by Paul Banks, p.67-76.

Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*, Plomer inherits that writer's idea of treating the relationship between the aging Queen and the young earl as if it were a full-blown romance. By portraying the relationship as a romance, the librettist instantly creates dramatic problems for the opera. Whatever may have been the emotional tone of their relationship in 1587, by the stage of the opera's setting, an affair between Elizabeth and Essex invites derision as not only unrealistic but also historically ungrounded.

The main theme in the second act is to further elaborate the contradictions between the Queen's pubic persona and her personal affection towards the Earl of Essex. The decision to use English masque as the centre piece for this act reconstructs Elizabeth I's dramatic and ritualistic purpose as the head of state in the opera but also has the function of being a symbolic gesture towards a formal celebrating of the coronation of Elizabeth II. In the opera, the masque takes place at the Guildhall in Norwich and the format Plomer and Britten employ is historically closer to the late medieval or Tudor procession, like the one in *Love's Labour's Lost* (1596), rather than the much more extravagant and urbanised Stuart masque. In *Gloriana*, the dramatic function of the procession is to further allegorise the central theme in which the Queen is hailed as the concord of the nation. This theme of ritualised celebration of concord steps away from the details of personal relations to act as a bridge between the first and the second Elizabethan age. The following two scenes in the second act return to the romantic topic and highlight the Queen's human dimension, portraying her somewhat in the manner of a nineteenth-century romantic heroine. The Queen's public humiliation of Lady Essex marks a transition from public jubilation in the first scene to a quasi-domestic dispute in the third scene and has the unfortunate effect of blurring the focus of the opera as a civil ritual to celebrate Elizabeth II's coronation.

The third act brings the conclusion of the opera where the Queen is forced to sacrifice her personal affection for the earl in order to fulfil her obligations to her loyal subjects – and maintain her power. In the first scene, the news that Essex has failed to quash the Irish rebellion, coupled with the ambition displayed in his continuous rivalry with other courtiers has put his relationship with the Queen under extreme pressure. As Essex's discontent with the court has escalated into a rebellion, the Queen has no choice but to crush the insurgents and re-assert her authority as the ruling monarch. Even though the act underlines the Queen's supreme regality, the intimate settings in scenes one and three expose her fragility as a romantic heroine.

Plomer's decision to present the Queen in her dressing-gown in the presence of Essex while intended to show the excessive behaviour of Essex also brings overtones suggesting that the opera is leaning towards a romantic mode. Nevertheless, the combination of prose and verse in archaic and modern English in the libretto coupled with Britten's constant mixture of his own style of music with allusions to Tudor melodies, reflects their ambition to re-create a national myth and even to draw a direct association between the first and the forthcoming Elizabethan eras. The fact that the opera is consciously heterogeneous indicates that both the librettist and the composer hoped to connect the Elizabethan style of poetry and music with their twentieth-century audience but lacked the publicly accepted conventional resources which would allow them to signal the ambiguous formalities of courtly love and behaviour.

As England had turned towards Protestantism, Elizabeth I wisely exploited her country's new religious alignment and presented herself not only as the sacred monarch but also as the virgin queen, in place of the catholic icon of the Virgin Mary.[21] In the second half of the sixteenth-century, the whole of Europe was in a state of religious ferment, which crucially divided the political world of the time.[22] There could be several readings of Elizabeth I's "marriage" to the nation but they to point to a conscious political strategy designed to shore up the position of the Queen. To this end she employed the term, "marriage" to position her self favourably when the frequent national crises, such as religion, the succession, royal courtships and rumours about her personal conduct caused concern[23] Furthermore, the queen's

[21] According to Levin's study, "Elizabeth presented herself as a Virgin Queen, echoing the cult not only of the Virgin Mary but also perhaps those of such saints as Frideswide and Uncumber, both of whose shrines had been destroyed in 1538, both of whom were said to be daughters of kings, and both of whose power came from their determined virginity." See Levin, *The Heart And Stomach Of A King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) p. 18-19.

[22] Most noticeable of the European religious conflicts between Protestantism and Catholicism can be found in France in 1572, the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day. To quote Robin Briggs' study, "Charles IX pressed with the plan for a marriage of reconciliation between his sister Margaret and Henri of Navarre, which was celebrated on 18 August; large of numbers of Protestant nobles came to Paris for the celebrations […] With extraordinary imprudence the Huguenot nobles threatened the king and the royal family with revenge, the threats were given substance by the presence of Huguenot forces near Paris, preparing to march to the Netherlands…the Queen Mother [Catherine de Medici] and her associates persuaded the king that Protestants were planning a coup, and that he must strike first, the result was the massacre…the Paris mob ran amok, killing three or four thousand Protestants over the next two day [25 and 26 August]…the court claimed that the massacre had been an deliberate act, fully justified by the conduct of the Huguenot leaders over the previous decade." Robin Briggs, *Early Modern France 1560-1715* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 21-22; Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1997) p. 490-496.

[23] To quote Wilson's study, "when, either because she was not content to hand the government over to a consort, or because she captured the imagination of her people, the queen was indeed regnant, some

partner in this platonic marriage was a sexless nation; thus, this marriage enabled Elizabeth I to switch on or off her physical femininity whenever she required a "kingly" or a "virginal" representation.

Elizabeth I presented herself as the sacred monarch, the head of the Anglican Church and portrayed her image as the Virgin Queen, in recognizable association not only with the Virgin Mary but also, arguably, two of the most popular saints of the time, namely, Uncumber and Frideswide.[24] Her strong association with the catholic saints are a pointed indication of her ambiguous attitudes toward the subject of religion.[25] In public, she was supreme leader of the Church of England which had already broken its ties with the Roman Catholic Church; however in private, she was still attending masses, kept a silver cross in her private chapel and avoided any religious argument, as reported in a letter to Philip II in 1559 by De Feria, one of the Spanish ambassadors.[26]

Historical narratives of the kind we have in this opera depend upon a number of standard devices to set the scene and establish period. In this case, to convincingly capture the court atmosphere of the English Renaissance period, the librettist uses the English masque, as a medium for the audience to experience the vibrant cultural activities of that time.[27] This reference has the further advantage for Plomer that it can serve as formal means of signifying the civic jubilation at the coronation of Elizabeth II. As it happens, the genre was fully established only during the reign of King James I; and so it was a hybrid of the Jacobean masque and earlier *processio* forms which Plomer adapted in the second act of *Gloriana*.[28] However Stuart masques still maintained many of the key characteristics of Elizabethan court entertainment and can be considered as a legitimate successor. According to Jean Wilson's study:

> The audience of a pageant, and of the later Elizabethan entertainments and Jacobean masques, might be described as threefold: the prince whom it honours, the public who view it, and

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system of imagery had to be devised which would reconcile her sex with her status." See Jean Wilson, *Entertainments for Elizabeth I* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd) p. 4.

[24] See C. Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, p. 18-19.

[25] Ibid, p. 18.

[26] Ibid, p. 18.

[27] See Donald Mitchell, "Public and Private in *Gloriana*" in *The Britten Companion* ed. by Christopher Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) p. 170-176.

[28] See John C. Meagher, *Method and Meaning in Jonson's Masques* (Notre Dame: University of Notre

> the participants themselves […] in their pageants, jousts and masques, the courts of Elizabeth and the Stuarts formulated their imagery for dealing with themselves and with their situation in relation to the ruler and to the country.[29]

It is this functional element of ritualised public entertainment that is being exploited by featuring a masque in the work. The librettist dramatizes the late Elizabethan courtly ritual for the twentieth-century operatic stage and thus invites the audience to make a legitimate, if slightly wobbly connection between the first and second Elizabethan eras.

The twentieth-century representation of English masque in *Gloriana* does preserve the original mode of formal eulogy of the ruling monarch from its early seventeenth-century predecessors; however the differences between the modern revival and its forerunners requires it to be fashioned in a slightly modified style.[30] In *Gloriana*, the main purpose of the inserted masque is to underline the dramatic theme of "time" and "concord", which is presented by male and female performers.[31] The male dancer, Time, initially presents a dance immediately after the masquers' introductory song and then leads them for the first dance; following upon that, a female courtier who represents Concord steps forward for the second dance. Plomer's intention to place "time" and "concord" can be interpreted as the arrival of a new epoch and forecasts a concordant reign under the newly crowned queen.[32]

Indeed, the masque in *Gloriana* does highlight a historical moment; six years after the end of the second World War, Britain was in desperate need of a powerful symbol to re-energize and re-define its national identity and to cast away the daunting years of austerity both during and after the war.[33] Peter Hennessy's study captures the general mood of this period, "it was an age dominated by the shadow of war, its accomplishments and shortcomings constantly measured against the hopes and expectations of 1945, when this time, Britain really was going to be a land fit for returning war heroes to live, work and raise a family in. […] Britain would remain a

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Dame Press, 1966) p. 1-30.

[29] See Jean Wilson, *Entertainment for Elizabeth I*, p.9; 13.

[30] See A. Malloy-Chirgwin, "Gloriana: Britten's 'slighted child'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 113-128.

[31] See D. Mitchell, "Public and Private in *Gloriana*" in *The Britten Companion* ed. by Christopher Palmer, p. 170-176.

[32] See William Palmer, "Notes on the Libretto of 'Gloriana'" in *Opera Guide: Peter Grimes/Gloriana by Britten* ed. by Nicholas John, p. 99-101.

[33] See Bevis Hillier, "Introduction" in *A Tonic To The Nation: The Festival of Britain 1951* ed. by Mary

great power abroad while operating a mixed economy and building a welfare state at home."[34] The librettist does go some way to presenting a convincing allegory for the future of the nation by reconstructing the English Renaissance art form and recalling its most successful ruling monarch, Elizabeth I.[35]

In comparison with Ben Jonson's celebrated masques, Plomer offers a rather blunt approach in reviving this ancient art form. While Jonson's works present an exuberance of images and references from Greek mythology, Plomer's modern revival tends to neglect this particular characteristic in favour of plain allegory.[36] The differences between Jonson's masques and Plomer's revival also reveal the artistic distance between English masques and twentieth century operas.[37] For the early English masques, the key element of a performance was the involvement of every spectator[38]; there was no strict separation between the performers and the audience. The main message, which poets, especially Ben Jonson, intended to convey to the courtiers, was to represent the universal harmony, which was maintained by the virtuous ruling monarch.[39] Thus, in the early English masque, there is no strict sense of stage, especially for the performers; the monarch was always the focus of attention throughout the whole piece.[40]

The modern revival, on the other hand, is framed in an operatic format in

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Banham and Bevis Hillier (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976) p. 10-19.

[34] See Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-1951* (New York, Pantheon Books: 1993) p. 2.

[35] See C. Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, p. 160-180. Seymour initiates the essay with the genesis of Britten's Gloriana and further elaborates its parallel elements with the first Elizabethan era.

[36] To quote Meagher, "In sympathy with demand for classical authenticity, Jonson found in mythographical handbooks a mine of information on the various ways in which the ancients had represented their gods, together with glosses on the meaning of their deeds and of their attributes… [Jonson] exploited the allegorical and symbolic possibilities which were far more clearly suggested in the Renaissance redactions than in the original poetry…the nature of the gods in Jonson's masques is suggested in two ways… purely conventional attributes (e.g., the peacocks which were associated with Juno in classical antiquity), and independently significant symbols through which a new figure could be defined (or which could be appropriately annexed to a figure with its own set of conventional attributes) …the result need not be banally clear – as Jonson says, 'a *Writer* should always trust somewhat to the capacity of the *Spectator*, especially at these *Spectacles*' – but it must be intelligible." in *Method and Meaning in Jonson's Masques,* p. 45-46.

[37] See Leslie Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987) p. 49-66 and 213-243, in these two chapters, by describing the development of English masque and twentieth century music theatre, the author subtly indicates the contrasting elements in these two genres.

[38] According to Meagher, "a masque was a framework for a ball - it was so before Jonson's introduction to the form and he almost certainly would not have been able to change it even if he had desired to - and thus was an occasion par excellence for the display of the works of powderers, perfumers, and tailors, and every form of vapid sophistication…the revels become an extension of the masque; the entire audience dances under the aegis of the power of the masques, extending and preserving the images of order and harmony." in *Method and Meaning in Jonson's Masques*, p. 183.

[39] Ibid, p. 181.

[40] Ibid, p, 163-176.

which the performance is designed not only for the limited numbers of courtiers but also for the general public even though the piece is dedicated to the queen.[41] While there is no division between performers and spectators in English masques, the relationships between performers and audience in an operatic performance can be regarded as less spontaneous.[42] The audience in the twentieth century expects to see a performance rather than to participate in one and is, in any case, unaccustomed to the reading of figurative allegory[43]. This difference in performance practice is reflected in Britten and Plomer's use of the masquers in their collaboration. Even though in *Gloriana,* the masquers in the second act are not presented as being played by courtiers as in its seventeenth century counterpart but instead by local mummers, the message in the verse is still echoing their seventeenth century predecessors, where the intention was to honour their ruling monarch through formalised eulogy.[44]

> No Greek nor Roman
> queenly woman
> knew such favour
> from Heav'n above
> as she whose presence
> is our pleasance:
> Gloriana
> hath all our love![45]

In this passage, the queen's popularity among her subjects is presented in the final phrase, where her subjects declare their admiration for her. The masquers directly associate their ruling monarch not only with the Greek and Roman era but also further hail the queen as a gift from Heaven.[46] In this the masquers are adopting the trope that under Elizabeth I's reign, the country is the true inheritor of the rich heritage of those great ancient civilizations and that the queen has also achieved a serene balance

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[41] See Eric W. White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) p. 59-67; 190-201.
[42] See Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1979) p. 188-201.
[43] See Tom Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) p. 3-15. The author explores the impact of the contributions bring about by producers who reshape the spectators' opera viewing experiences in the twentieth century.
[44] See R. Hewison, "'Happy were he': Benjamin Britten and the *Gloriana* story" in *Britten's Gloriana: Essays and Sources* ed. by Paul Banks, p. 1-16.
[45] *Gloriana*, act II scene i.
[46] According to Meagher, "It is Elizabeth, not James, who comes to mind when we think of literature extravagantly devoted to the glory of a monarch. But that was largely the tribute of love, unasked and really not needed" in *Method and Meaning in Jonson's Masques*, p. 168

with the blessing of God.[47] Furthermore, while every aspect of the seventeenth century art form is designed to be read as a means of glorifying the ruling monarch; the modern version recollects the public's adulation for the character of the queen, Elizabeth I, in order to create an association between the second Elizabethan era and its Renaissance counterpart.[48] Taking Elizabeth I as the subject for the coronation opera is significant: although Elizabeth I's reign was not as entirely serene and was beset by foreign threats, her supremacy, which lasted four and a half decades, did significantly lay down a foundation, not only for the confidence in a future female rule but a strong sense of national identity.[49] The subject builds upon the sense that post war Britain can build optimistically in a fresh reign and embrace the fruits of a new epoch.[50]

The decision to use English masque as a play within a play in *Gloriana* also exposes some serious problems in the piece. It is rather obvious that whatever Plomer's intentions, the masque as a dramatic form is simply dead: the audience would be inclined to regard it as an exercise in historical allusion, not as a viable piece of musical theatre. But has been worth some discussion because the masque points to a larger problem in the piece – and that is that the opera does not seem to know where it is going. The purpose of creating *Gloriana* is to participate in the making of a national myth of cohesion and patriotism for the coronation of Elizabeth II. However, in the mechanics of the plot the audience is given a rather curious blend of "romance" between the aged queen and her clearly unreliable courtier; some historical flummery about the rivalry with Mountjoy; an allegorical masque; and the employment of nineteenth-century myth-making about the Virgin Queen and the

[47] To quote Wilson, "they may also be being assured that the good that they wish from the ruler is being expressed to him. This is particularly true of events like the coronation procession, with its pleas, hopes, and advice. And it is clear that Elizabeth recognised this – her bravura gestures, her grateful thanks, show as much." in Wilson, *Entertainments For Elizabeth I,* p. 10.

[48] See A. Malloy-Chirgwin, "*Gloriana*: Britten's 'slighted child'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. by Mervyn Cooke, p. 113-128.

[49] According to Jeremy Black, "royal fiscal policies, particularly the sale of monopolies to manufacture or sell certain goods, and also additional taxes, led to bitter criticism in the Parliaments of 1597 and 1601; and also failed to provide sufficient resources to bring success in war. Puritanism led to disputes in Parliament, especially in 1587 when Puritan MP's tried to legislate for a Presbyterian church settlement, an unsuccessful move that caused an angry dispute between Elizabeth, who opposed changes in religious matters, and some MPs. Elizabeth found it difficult to create a stable government after the ministers who had served her for so long – William Cecil, Lord Burghley; Leicester and Walsingham – died." Jeremy Black, *A History Of The British Isles* (London: Macmillan, 1997) p. 110; C. Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion*, p. 160-180.

[50] See Buxton Orr, "Some Reflections on the Operas of Benjamin Britten" in *Opera Guide: Peter Grimes/Gloriana by Britten* ed. by Nicholas John, p.71-74.

creation of English society. All these historical subplots and mythic elements are cramped and not always relevant in the context of the coronation. The librettist also want to point to the coming of "a new Elizabethan age", but merely gesturing at parallels does not provide any focus on what this may involve and the comparison remains strained. It is true that there tends to be something opaque about myths – part of their power is that they do not have obvious morals or lessons; yet masque is the very antithesis of myth – it is allegorical and allegories are meant to be decoded in a fairly straightforward one-to-one fashion. Thus, by portraying the ambiguous relationship between Elizabeth I and Robert Devereux, what kind of parallel is being drawn for the new queen? Obviously, being a virgin is not available; what is meant by a "new Elizabethan age"? Shakespeare and Jonsons' works are frequently quoted in the libretto. Does it suggest that the librettist has the intention to match their achievement? Furthermore, how seriously are we meant to take the Essex "romance" aspect? Plomer does not properly decode what it means in such a court to be a "favourite" with the result that the audience finds itself at rather a loss for relevance. In *Gloriana*, instead of history we get something that slides dangerously towards historical pulp fiction.

Historically, in order to maintain undisputed power, Elizabeth I portrayed herself as a hermaphrodite head of state, thus enabling her to switch on or off her physical femininity as and when it was required.[51] In *Gloriana*, the librettist discards this politic myth, but also the conventions of courtliness and portrays as if in realistic terms a supposed romantic attachment between the queen and the Earl of Essex and this depiction invites a question about the queen's characterization.

> Ah, my faithful elf, it has come to this!
> I have failed to tame my thoroughbred.
> He is still too proud;
> I must break his will
> and pull down his great heart.
> It is I who have to rule![52]

The proposition seems to be that as the sole ruler of the country, the queen has to establish herself as the divinely approved sovereign of her nation. All of her

[51] Levin notes, "it may mean that politically she [Elizabeth I] is a man or that she is a woman who can take on male rights. She may be both woman and man in one, both king and queen together, a male body politic in concept while a female body natural in practice." See Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power,* p.121.

subjects are required to follow her lead and to be "tamed" under her reign. However, as the sovereign of her country, she has to sacrifice her personal feelings to achieve the ultimate submission of her subjects. In order to create a majestic declamation for the queen, the librettist employs words such as, "proud", "break", "pull" and "rule" to indicate vigorous verbal images suggestive of romantic conflict within the queen. But "favourites" at court are normally used to balance contending power-blocs and comparatively rarely as simple sexual objects as Plomer is trying to suggest in the opera. The romantic element in the opera has delivered a confusing signal to the audience which is expecting a more ritualistic and mythic quality in the coronation opera.

The conflict in Elizabeth I's personality is most prominent in her soliloquy at the end of the first act of the opera in which she reflects not only on her mission for the nation but also her private affection for the Earl of Essex.

> On rivalries 'tis safe for kings
> to base their power:;
> but how their spirit longs
> for harmonies and mellowings
> of discords harsh,
> of real and phantom wrongs!
> *(thinking of Essex)*
> If life were love and love were true,
> then could I love thee through and through! [53]

The passage opens with the queen's meditation on the art of maintaining power in a turbulent court. The opening line presents a distinctly Machiavellian image of the ruling monarch as manipulator. However, the queen then suddenly changes her majestic tone as a calculating sovereign to the voice of a love-struck woman. The stage direction "thinking of Essex" is deadly. How is the singer meant to follow this instruction to do a bit of thinking? The libretto has slipped away from the opera-house and into the conventions of the novel. Such a redundant stage direction

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[52] *Gloriana*, act III, scene i.

[53] The Queen continues, "But God gave me a scepter,/The burden and the glory –/I must not lay them down:/I live and reign a virgin,/Will die in honour,/Leave a refulgent crown!/O God, my King, sole ruler of the world, /That pulled me from a prison to a palace/To be a sovereign Princess/And to rule the people of England: /Thou hast placed me high, but my flesh is frail: /Without Thee my throne is unstable, /My kingdom tottering, my life uncertain: /Oh maintain in this weak woman the heart of a man! /Errors and faults have best me from my youth, /I bow myself before the throne of Thy grace; Forgive and protect me, O God, my King, /That I may rule and protect my people in peace." in

expresses the librettist's hesitation in pinpointing the character's actual motivation. The following two lines are meant to reveal the queen's strong private attachment to the Earl of Essex, as she reflects, "if life were love […] then could I love thee through and through!" But is this the relation between monarch and courtier? It is clear that the main theme here is that as the absolute ruler of England, the Queen must refrain from falling into the trap of indulging herself in private emotional adventures. So she is shown as soon composing herself and further affirming as her sole duty, "I live and reign a virgin, / will die in honour, / leave a refulgent crown!" The Queen's private reflection, while undoubtedly noble, brings into question the terms of discussion of her "romantic" attachment to the Earl of Essex; furthermore, it also further imparts a disturbance to the general scheme of the opera as a ritualistic celebration of the newly crowned queen, Elizabeth II.

The decision to use the word, "refulgent", indicates another area of difficulty for the librettist. Historical dramas always present a linguistic problem of representation: it is fatally easy to slip into a artificial and even unintentionally comic tone as one tries to recreate the atmosphere of being in the Elizabethan court. "Refulgent" originated in the early sixteenth-century, first from the Latin word, *refulgere* which means shining with, or reflecting, a brilliant light.[54] The lustrous impression which the word is intended to convey is meant to reflect the Queen's public image. Elizabeth I's "The Ditchley Portrait" by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, depicts the queen in the most regal, serene and radiant manner. The silvery white gown and her jewellery further elevate her majestic presence and reflect the gleaming sun which lights up the entire canvas. Queen Elizabeth I, therefore, was the refulgent queen. By using such a word, the librettist hopes to creates some aspect of the vivacity of the character through the text and also consciously conjure up the idea of a national myth. Nevertheless, there remains a touch of the "inkhorn" about it. *Gloriana*, like Gheeraerts' portrait, is created with the intention of capturing its ceremonial purpose and the juxtaposition of Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II in an operatic presentation clearly demonstrates the composer and the librettist's fervent view in re-creating a national myth. The opera is a symbolic gesture to Elizabeth II that she, like Elizabeth I, unites the nation and she will lead the country into a new

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Gloriana, Act I, scene ii.

[54] See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by James A. H. Murray, Henry Bradley, W. A. Craigie and C. T. Onions, vol. XIII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) p. 493. *Encarta: World English Dictionary*, ed.

Elizabethan age. *Gloriana* also suggests the ritualistic and sacrificial purpose of a ruling monarch. "Refulgent" indeed presents the mythic quality of this coronation opera, though with a lingering sense of trying too hard.

Having grown up in the hostile surroundings of a court full of intrigue, the young Elizabeth had already been forced to learn the art of ambiguity in presentation to ensure her survival[55]; thus nowadays it is virtually impossible to know where exactly she stood in religious matters, as Levin's study reflects, "she was content to believe that God knew what was in her heart, about her faith as in so many other matters, and to let it be."[56] However, as a Queen, Elizabeth I made a tremendous effort to practice religious ceremonies, such as the Maundy ceremony and touching for the king's evil, in order to build up a sacred mode of her reign

In symbolically promoting herself as the sacred monarch, Elizabeth I not only politically strengthened the English identity but also religiously positioned herself as the head of the Anglican Church. For the stability of her country's political environment and religious atmosphere, Elizabeth I therefore created a myth that she sacrificed her private life, in order to embody the ultimate image of a ruling sovereign.[57] Her carefully constructed representation was that as the absolute authority in her court she had brought civil concord to England during the last several decades of the fifteenth century and furthermore that her political determination could even be seen to surpass that of any king.[58] Her image of being a Virgin Mary figure had also successfully spanned the nation's transition from Catholicism to Protestantism.

The queen's virginal personification was also, paradoxically, used to create a tenderly maternal figure as the head of state. However, it was said, her historical achievement was at the cost of her private happiness. In Plomer's libretto, the queen eventually has to sacrifice her private affection for the Earl of Essex in order to affirm

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by Kathy Rooney (London: Bloomsbury, 1999) p. 1580.

[55] See David Starkey, *Elizabeth: Apprenticeship* (London: Vintage, 2001) p. xi.

[56] See *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, p. 18.

[57] To quote Simon Schama's study, "and as hopes of her marriage waned, the cult of her virginity… took off. Many of her subsequent symbolic personifications – the phoenix, the ermine, the crescent moon, the rose and the pearl – had been emblems of the Madonna and were now transposed to the Virgin Queen. She also appeared as the chaste Diana and Tuccia, the Vestal Virgin… or with a snowy white ermine or the pelican which…sacrificially fed its young from the blood of its own chest, Or again Elizabeth might be the sun, whose radiance gave the beams of the rainbow their colours. She was everything, and as the eyes and ears on the 'Rainbow' portrait make clear, she heard a saw everything." See Simon Schama, *A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World? 3000BC – AD 1603* (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2000) p. 372.

her matrimonial bond with her nation.[59] Thus, there is no more appropriate conclusion to the life of Elizabeth I than Plomer's wording for the final scene of the opera, where the queen reflects on her reign, "I have ever used to set the last Judgement Day before mine eyes, and when I have to answer the highest Judge, I mean to plead that never thought was cherished in my heart that tended not to my people's good. I count it the glory of my crown that I have reigned with your love, and there is no jewel that I prefer before that jewel."[60] In a curious climax to an opera, these words are *spoken*, as if both composer and librettist are fearful that their patriotic message might be lost in the context of musical expression. Plomer refulgently transforms this historical incident into an unusual theatrical format and invites his audience to experience the inner struggle and anguish of a ruling monarch, brought about by the intense personal sacrifice she has to make for the sake of her country. Through *Gloriana*, Britten and Plomer offer a re-interpretation of the meaning of a sacred monarch which might span both antiquity and the modern era. The fact that the composer and the librettist undertook to participate in several myths about history and the current state of the country does not necessarily diminish their status as myths – nor does it indicate that Britten and Plomer were unaware that they were manipulating mythic themes. Whether they succeeded in making these myths live is another question.

III. Fancy That!

The portrayal of female characters in music theatre corresponds to various levels of social position, status and function for women. In *Vanessa*, the heroine's passivity echoes the norm for the depiction of a female character during the nineteenth-century. Elizabeth II in *Gloriana* reflects a very different quality of operatic heroine. As the Queen of England, Elizabeth II was able to have a direct impact and influence on her nation and society. The portrayal of female characters in that the work could break the tie of the standardised mode of the nineteenth-century style in the depiction of women chiefly because of the distancing effects of time and the royal status of the

[58] See Starkey, *Elizabeth: Apprenticeship*, p. xii.
[59] See R. Hewison, "'Happy were he': Benjamin Britten and the *Gloriana* story" in *Britten's Gloriana: Essays and Sources* ed. by Paul Banks, p. 12-13.
[60] *Gloriana*, Act III, scene iii.

heroine. The presentation of the Duchess of Argyll in Thomas Adès and Philip Hensher's *Powder Her Face* is another continuation of music theatre's fascination for female characters. However, instead of following the nineteenth-century mode of portraying her as a "fallen woman"; Adès and Hensher are able to work with changes and continuities in notions concerning social status and female morality as they present a heroine having a privileged social status and yet living an extremely promiscuous life style. The conclusion of the opera ironically underlines her symbolic status as a social victim in the transition from society notable to celebrity. Her scandalous life style made her the perfect scapegoat to be hounded by the press and a celebrity-hungry and prurient society.

The opera captures this twentieth-century phenomenon by using the wildly publicised life of Margaret Whigham as its central feature and uses it as the base to structure a three act, eight scene chamber opera with a concluding epilogue. The purpose in using the style of a chamber opera to represent the subject is to create an intimate atmosphere between actors/singers and the audience while at the same time generating a dramatic illusion that the characters are under close scrutiny by the general public.

The two act opera is framed with an initial and a concluding scene, set in 1990, in which the focus is on the duchess' final moments at the hotel where she has been living for the last twelve years. After the audience witnesses the duchess being mocked and humiliated by her maid and an electrician in the first scene, the action then flashes back to nineteen thirty-four, during the first days after her divorce from Mr Freeling. The scene not only reveals the heroine's relief at the ending of an unhappy marriage and her anticipation of the duke's imminent arrival but also introduces the high society life to which she is accustomed. The maid and the electrician from the first scene are now doubling the roles of Confidante and Lounge Lizard who, ominously, appear to be the closest people among the duchess' social circle. The duke and Margaret's wedding in nineteen thirty-six is the centrepiece of the third scene. It is described in the "Fancy" aria which is sung by the maid. In this scene, the librettist begins to open out the theme that the duchess' life is now not just being focused on her inner circle but is also the subject of envy and fascination by her personal staff, who watch her every move. After the wedding, the story then moves forward to the time of the coronation of Elizabeth II when the duchess is shown in a hotel seducing a waiter. The following scene between the duke and his mistress

makes two points. The first is that the double-standard of morality between men and women still obtains and secondly that we see the beginnings of a new era in which the duchess's infidelities are not just the whispered secrets of a tight-knit group in society but are moving into the public domain.

Act two begins with the duchess' highly publicised divorce in nineteen fifty-five. Although being utterly condemned by the judge and the general public, she is still sufficiently resilient to brush aside defeat and refuse to change her ways. The dramatic function of the two doubling roles of the maid and the electrician in the first scene, has gradually transformed them from being supportive close friends into envious household staff to being representatives of frantic public interest in the sixth scene. This scene also indicates the diminishing influence of the upper-class, as a result of the social upheavals after the Second World War as the establishment gradually lost its power to safeguard its members, and the duchess became the object of unrestrained public prurience. The seventh scene of the opera is set in nineteen seventy. The scene deals with the heroine's detestation of contemporary society. For her, nothing is where it used to be.

> DUCHESS
> The great houses have gone.
> There is rubble where there were palaces.
> There are hotels where there were houses.[61]

The duchess' remarks on modern society underline her inability to adapt to life in the new era. Her refusal to adapt, even to understand that she longer has power and money, finally results in her involuntary departure from her hotel room in the eighth scene. The epilogue presents the moral of the piece. As the maid and the electrician emerge from underneath the bed, their playful gestures are an ironic invitation for the audience to question the tripartite relationship between the press, the public and the duchess' private life.

This dramatization of the life of Margaret Whigham, Duchess of Argyll who died in St George's Nursing Home, Pimlico, in 1993,[62] is a snapshot reconstruction of the duchess' scandalous life which set out to present a post-modern depiction of the femme fatale character in the operatic genre. The manner of dramatisation of the duchess' life immediately poses a question about the criteria for a true tragic heroine.

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[61] See *Powder Her Face*, act II scene seven.
[62] See Charles Castle, *The Duchess Who Dared: Life of Margaret, Duchess of Argyll* (London: Pan

Although the subject of *Powder Her Face* is about an infamous duchess with an enormous sexual appetite, unlike Violetta Valéry in *La Traviata*, Margaret Whigham is neither a prostitute nor a courtesan. Furthermore, throughout the entire opera the Duchess does not appear to suffer from any physical illness. Compared with a typical nineteenth-century operatic heroine, who would either die of consumption, perish by taking arsenic or commit suicide at a young age, the Duchess simply lives on and on. Again, the Duchess is immensely rich in her own right: she can even purchase a duke to enable her to climb further up the social ladder. In all of this, the Duchess of Argyll does not adhere to the stereotype of a nineteenth-century operatic heroine. And this ambiguity of the Duchess' dramatic function poses some interesting questions as to the genre of the opera. To begin with, *Powder Her Face* does not have the shape or weight of a tragedy. The characterisation of a superficial, brainless and self-absorbed duchess does not incarnate the depth of a tragic heroine. Moreover, the main theme of the opera has nothing to suggest that the heroine is a sacrificial victim to fulfil society's desire for simultaneous titillation and sexual conformity. The Duchess simply ignores standard moral codes by continuously seeking sexual gratification and treats with the contempt the curiosity of the lower orders. On the other hand, Adés and Hensher's collaboration does not resemble a comedy either. The opera does not provide amusement or satire through its subject matter in that the Duchess of Argyll's personal story does not supply the audience with any overtly comic materials, unless one is supposed to find the spectacle of a Duchess drunk on stage inherently amusing. Though the opera produces the first on-stage fellatio scene for the operatic genre, the atmosphere of moral squalor it creates only sensationalises the opera's theatrical narrative. The employment of this scene only further raises the suspicion that the opera is itself working on the same level of prurience as the tabloid press it suggests it might be satirising. Finally, the problem of genre is confounded by lack of dramatic depth and operatic narrative. The structure of the piece is extremely episodic and the ending does not bring present us with a satisfactory dramatic resolution; inconveniently, the Duchess simply lives on.

The concerns about genre can be illustrated with respect to the theme of the duchess' ability to seduce and manipulate her male targets. It is presented at some length in the waitress' aria, *Fancy*. While it is being sung, the heroine's marriage to

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Books, 1994) p. 145-156.

the Duke of Argyll is presented in a series of silent background tableaux strongly suggestive of general moral disarray (including that of the Priest conducting the ceremony).

> Fancy.
> Fancy being rich.
> Fancy being lovely.
> Fancy having money to waste, and not minding it.
> They've got too much money, and nothing to do.
> Nothing to do, but come to a wedding in the middle of the week.
> (*laughter*)
> Only fancy.[63]

The aria has is comprised of at least three layers which are open to different but interconnected interpretations. Sung by the maid as waitress it summarizes firstly, the duchess' general manner of life and her character as seen through another person's eyes; secondly, we see something of the waitress' personal character and expectations; and, finally, how the librettist views the lives of this echelon of society.

The very first word in this section shows the librettist's intended use of double-entendre. "Fancy" might indicate both a verbal wish for something, an adjectival description of a flamboyant lifestyle and carries suggestions of "fancy-man" for the duke. The aria depicts the duchess' desire or "fancy" to "purchase a Duke" and her use of an attractive physical appearance to do so. "Fancy", moves on to express the waitress' fantasy of having the life style of the duchess – a luxurious and seemingly exciting existence. The aria is also designed to engage the audience's fantasy. The waitress's description of the duchess' wedding will satisfy the celebrity-hungry public and feed their imagination of living like a real duchess. The librettist is here interweaving the actual events and tabloid myth about the Duchess as a foundation

[63] The rest of the aria continues, "Fancy eating lobster in the middle of the week standing up. / Fancy drinking champagne in the middle of the day and too drunk to worry and twelve and six a bottle. / Fancy being her. / The food's so lovely, though. / Shining like water, all under aspic. / Cut fruit in aspic, vegetable shapes, whole chicken. / Fish swimming in aspic, caught in stiff water. / Preserved. / She doesn't look happy. She looks rich. (*laughter*)/ I wouldn't want to be happy if I was as rich as that. / I'd be like her. I'd marry rich men. / I wouldn't live in two rooms in Kentish Town, / I'll tell you that for nothing. / I'd wear a tiara for breakfast. / I'd sleep in an hotel if I felt like it in the afternoon. / I'd eat nothing that wasn't lovely in aspic and hard work for someone. / I'd buy a whole shop full of diamonds and have it delivered in a carriage if I felt like it. / And I would feel like it, and I'd look as miserable as sin. / Just like her. / Just fancy being her. / Fancy putting milk and almonds in your bath. / Fancy your underclothes costing thirty shillings the ounce. / Yes, fancy having nothing to do but wait for the man for your hair and the girl for your skin and the boy with the telegram with reply paid for. / Fancy purchasing a Duke. / That's what I want. / That's what you want. / You'd love it." Ibid. p. 68-69.

motif of the opera. The waitress here is a symbolic proxy of the everyman-audience. Her aria reveals the inter-dependence of deepest fantasy (to live like a duchess) and envy of her mistress. The detailed description of the duchess' life style through her maid symbolises the general public's desire to pry into even the smallest aspect of a celebrity's daily routine and how close that fantasising identification is to hatred.

"Fancy being her" finally indicates that the waitress knows that this fantasy can never be fulfilled: waitresses do not become as rich as the duchess or move into the upper reaches of society (especially in 1936). "Aspic" in the aria not only indicates a savoury meat jelly, which the duchess encounters frequently but it also provides an important image throughout the entire opera. Margaret's life and expectations are set in the spectatorial aspic of the 1930s and will never move on from that. Moreover one of the main attractions of aspic is its presentational value – it is to be looked at. Even though the waitress' personal reflection on the duchess' opulent lifestyle is in sharp contrast to her own situation, the passage actually is also a reflection on the public's huge appetite for details of the duchess' life. The duchess is the focus of the public's and perhaps the audience's unexamined fantasy.

The waitress' comment on the duchess takes on a paradoxical tone as she utters, "I'd look as miserable as sin. / Just like her. / Just fancy being her." Here, the waitress ironically suggests that while the duchess' infamous life style may be sinful, it still remains an object of envy and in actual fact she would rather like to live like the duchess. This neatly captures the essence of prurience in its blend of disapproval and desire. The character would love to indulge in some sinful mischief; especially as the secularised concept of sin, for the waitress, is not equivalent to misery – or even wrong-doing. Finally as she declares "that's what I want. / That's what you want. / You'd love it" the waitress is addressing not only herself but also the audience and suggesting that this is their fantasy as well. Although the Duchess was notorious for her various affairs and sexual liaisons, she and the public were both enjoying the media exposure and her celebrity status. According to Castle, "Margaret always wanted to be a star, and she became one – a star of court rooms and tabloids. Her role was always that of the heroine and she made everyone else seem the villain."[64]

The main elements in the opera are the symbols of money and sex which are faithfully reflected in the "fancy" aria. The entire passage describes the duchess'

[64] Ibid, p. x.

extravagant and carefree life in its financial aspect, juxtaposing this with the waitress' forlorn hope of being equally rich, while her debauched behaviour is represented by the ejaculatory sexual symbolism, when the waitress opens a bottle of champagne: "the bottle explodes, she pours it into a glass while singing, and carries on pouring into the overflowing glass until the bottle is quite empty and the table sopping wet." Just as the duchess has the ability to "purchase a Duke", so the waitress would like to have the ability to physically and financially drain a man in order to achieve her aim.

Although the body of the opera will be much occupied with presenting the duchess' extravagant way of life as the object of people's fantasy and envy, the libretto attempts, in the opening scene, some sobering reflections on the vanity of human wishes. The duet of electrician and maid stresses that alongside her former ostentatious wealth there is Time's *momento mori*:

> ELECTRICIAN AND MAID
> The buying of Joy.
> And in the end it evaporates into air –
> Like everything. The stuff, the money,
> It goes, all goes –[65]

Hensher employs Jean Patou's most famous perfume, "Joy" as a symbol which not only captures the glamour but also the historical background of the opera. Released in 1935 at the height of world economic depression, the perfume represents a luxury item which no ordinary people could never afford. But, sings the duet, in the end it all goes. It is not clear if this is just another reflection of the characters' envy or whether it is a shot at moralism on the part of the author. If it is the latter, it a singularly unhappy gesture given the considerable length of time it all took to go.

In *Powder Her Face*, the heroine takes full advantage of her personal charm and beauty, not only to satisfy her sexual desires but also to achieve her aim of ascending towards a higher social status.[66] Her daring character is perhaps a twentieth century female version of *Don Giovanni*. Like Mozart and da Ponte's tragic hero, the duchess embodies the sentiment of the piece. However, whereas Giovanni is eventually dragged down to hell by the Commendatore, the duchess is demonised by the press – which does not seem too bad by comparison. Following her citing for adultery in the

[65] *Powder Her Face*, Act I scene i.
[66] See Charles Castle, *The Duchess Who Dared: Life of Margaret, Duchess of Argyll*, p. 37-38.

divorce action, the heroine reveals the essence of her inner feelings even though she is at one of the lowest points of her life.

> So that is all.
> I am judged.
> I do not care.
> And that was all.
> There are worse things in life.
> I am still loved.
> I was loved before I was a Duchess,
> and I am a Duchess still.
> You. Summon my car.
> I am still young.
> I am still rich.[67]

The Duchess' declamatory utterance reflects her determination to maintain her social status and her general way of life, though post-war society has moved some considerable distance from the world of the thirties. The librettist captures the protagonist's immense self-esteem in the word "still" which is repeated throughout the verse. It can be read as an indicator of the duchess' unbeatable spirit. The word, which suggests a motionless subject and a continuing situation, symbolises the heroine's resolution to maintain and prolong the benefits of her title and the pleasure of wealth. Thus, "I am still loved" and "I am a Duchess still" vividly demonstrate the protagonist's desire and pride in her life. The latter phrase has further suggested a reference to John Webster's play, *The Duchess of Malfi*. "I am Duchess of Malfi still" – though the point of the echo is not clear. Is to be taken to the disadvantage of Margaret? Are we to think of her in the light of Malfi's miserable death at the hands of a hired assassin? Or are we to compare Duchesses on the grounds of virtue? In tune with the other uncertainties of purpose mentioned above, it is hard to know.[68] The aria also reflects the heroine's detestation of "the middle class'" showing any impertinent interest in the way she conducts her life. The word, "lie" immediately

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[67] The verse continues, "I can pay the costs. / I can face the consequences of my own actions, and the consequences of lies told about me. / I do not care what lies are told about me, by members of the middle classes. / That is what they are there for, the middle class to lie. / I often wondered, and now I know. / And I am there to be beautiful. / I have a purpose in life, which is to be loved. / I know my purpose, and I know my place. / And I was brought up well, and I am a lady. / And I am a lady still, and I do not lie. / You. Now. Summon my car. / No, Today is no different from any other day, but today. / Today I walk." Act II scene vi, *Powder Her Face*.

[68] See *The Duchess of Malfi*, act IV, scene ii, line 134. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi and Other*

evokes dual layers of interpretation. On one hand, the word reveals the duchess' detestation of the public or media's view of her; however, the word also indicates the public's conception of the heroine's philosophy of life, that is, the gratification of her sexual urge.

The strong but free-floating ironic effects throughout the opera reveal its post-modernist status. The musical collage with its blend of jazzy and classical styles of musical narrative not only provides the story with a certain historical style references but also acts like a critique of the main character. The generic ambiguity, together with the mixture of satirical and tragic elements in the opera further exposes a post-modernist inability to take for granted the certainties of any specific narrative mode. In the opera are we meant to see the Duchess as a tart? No. Is her fate tragic? She lived in considerable style for another thirty years after the famous divorce – where is the tragedy? Yet there is something unhappy about her fate – there is, for example, a problem with the extreme promiscuity: the fellatio scene is undoubtedly distasteful, but it is pointing to a genuine area of worry concerning her character, a sense of sexuality entirely out of control (with neither pleasure, love nor profit involved). And despite her defiance, she was undoubtedly an early victim of celebrity culture and public prurience. Perhaps more consideration and weight should be given to the implications of the first and final scenes and the sense of that slow withering. Perhaps the point of the contrast with the Duchess of Malfi is that in the face of unhinged hatred and certain death Malfi asserts her nobility, virtue and unchanged character. It is hard to see that Margaret has any equivalent to fall back on, and perhaps that is as much of a tragedy as post-modernism can allow.

The main materials for *Powder Her Face* are a combination of tabloid myth about the Duchess of Argyll and the actual incidents. However, by employing this constructed mythical narrative more or less as it was created by the tabloid newspapers, the opera immediately poses for itself a number of strategic problems for which the standardised themes and resources of music theatre have no obvious solutions. The main interest of tabloid newspapers is largely prurient and the stories they provide have only the moral status of hypocrisy. For the majority of the general public, the Duchess' notorious life had no other dimension than that which was presented in the tabloid press. Although tabloid journalism has the appearance of

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Plays, ed. by René Weis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 170.

moral concern, their real interest is in providing impertinent detail in order to titillate their readership. The Duchess' immense affluence accompanied by her scandalous behaviour, made her the perfect sacrificial victim to the supposed social norms of the newspapers. Adés and Hensher's collaboration adopts several notorious incidents in the Duchess' life as the basis of the opera but in doing so have some difficulty in distinguishing what they are doing from the sensationalism of the yellow press. And offering neither tragedy, satire nor social comedy, their method mystifies the dramatic tone of the piece and baffles its audience who are left searching for the main purpose of the work. Moreover, even though the Duchess had a notorious reputation and what is called a dramatic life, such real life incidents lack either a clear narrative arc or a satisfactory artistic form. With the ambitious theatrical adaptation of an infamous duchess and a stylish musical support, *Powder Her Face* still falls short in providing its audience with an exemplary form of operatic presentation.

Nevertheless, Phillip Hensher and Thomas Adès' *Powder Her Face* still illustrates an iconic vitality of the *femme fatale* character in music theatre. By doubling the singers, Hensher and Adès produce the illusion that the people around the duchess are watching her every move as though they were paparazzi. The dramatization of the life of Margaret Whigham, Duchess of Argyll, further reminds the audience that the operatic vamp is not merely a cliché but is still has some scope for employment in a contemporary framework. The opera creates a new way of portraying an operatic heroine. For the general public, the spectacle of the heroine abandoning herself to sexual and financial gratification still has the possibility of seriously challenging the norms of human morality. One of the tricks of the libretto is that it makes unclear the degree to which the audience is complicit both in the challenge to morality and the shocked prurience of the tabloids. The total secularisation of the notion of sacrifice and its partial absorption into the cult of celebrity means that the victim too is now frequently complicit in the ritual and no longer needs to be killed, merely humiliated, after which the publicity machine can move on to its next victim.

4
Dangerous Liaisons

I. Messages from a Red Libretto

> I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung
> Who raised the weak above the strong
> When I appear the people hang
> Upon my words, and for his sake
> Whose wreaths are heavy round my neck
> I speak according to the book.[1]

At this point, at the finale of Act II of *Nixon in China* (1987) Chiang Ch'ing brandishes the little red book, *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (1966) while forcefully declaiming her opinion of the ongoing revolutionary spirit in China. This not only provides a powerful theatrical image on stage by focusing on Mao's communist doctrine but Alice Goodman also uses it to symbolize the cultural revolution itself and by displaying the little book, she skilfully introduces a libretto (referring to the original Italian meaning of *libretto* i.e. little book) within her own libretto, thus providing the reader in effect, with an opus within the opera. According to the composer, "*The Red Detachment of Women*, a study in agitprop dance, theatre and music, was based on a political ballet from the period of the Cultural Revolution that had been shaped and ideologically massaged by Madame Mao. Mark Morris's choreography features the same absurd images of ballet dancers on point, dressed in the uniforms of the People's Revolutionary Army and brandishing rifles. In composing for this scene I set for myself the equally absurd goal of making it sounds as if it were the creation of a committee of composers, none of whom were sure of what the other was doing. This followed the line of the tradition of creating "people's" art."[2]

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[1] See Act II, scene ii, *Nixon in China*. Alice Goodman, "Towards Nixon in China" sleeve notes to *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 51

[2] John Adams, http://www.earbox.com/W-nixoninchina.html

The performance of *The Red Detachment of Women* in the opera is the centre of the whole narrative and it is important to bear in mind that virtually none of this ballet works as intended: the Nixons intervene in a stage performance as if it were reality; Chiang starts shouting about a cue that is not the right cue and fires a pistol to emphasise her point; she then shoulders aside the players to sing an aria about herself – something that does not seem to be the part of the intended performance. In other words, a show that was intended as an illustration of triumphant political purpose goes off the rails, because the participants and spectators either do not know their roles or have chosen to ignore them. The result is chaos.

In an event such as the Sino-American summit in 1972 the political gestures are heavily ritualised. Consider the extremely elaborate and formalised rites of etiquette, and how easily offence can be given and taken by the slightest deviation from these arbitrary rules of behaviour. Almost invariably, they also involve a ritual exchange of gifts whose burden and meaning is entirely symbolic and whose value and significance are most carefully calculated. But rituals only work when the participants understand both their position in the rite and the overall meaning of the ceremony (a meaning that is frequently embedded in a myth). In the performance of *The Red Detachment of Women* we see that nobody properly understands the rules and are in any case disinclined to obey them. Things just happen. Both sides in this summit are behaving as if they are involved in profound negotiations (a ritual of exchange), but the evasions, misunderstandings and cross-purposes that emerge in the opera are a strong indication that any substantive outcomes will likely be the product of forces other than personal. Rituals of propitiation and sacrifice are often read as being instrumental in purpose – if we offer sacrifice in order to mitigate the effects of the plague we will almost always succeed. But that is because plagues run their course anyway.

The encounter between Nixon and Mao in 1972 was the very first direct communication between the leaders of these two great states since the Second World War.[3] Moreover, the meeting also symbolised the western world's recognition of communist China, which had established itself after the fierce civil war of 1949.[4] Intriguingly, both leaders had their own personal diplomatic reasons and hidden

[3] See Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Ted Smart, 2005) p. 601-602.
[4] See Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1972) p. 471-474.

personal political ambitions embodied in this meeting. Nixon, for his part, was trying to build up an amiable relationship with China, in order to open a door to an enormous business opportunity for the stagnant American economy.[5] In addition, Nixon and his administration fervently hoped that an improved relationship with communist China would pave the way towards a diminution of Chinese support for the communist Vietnamese regime.[6] Thirdly, it was election-year in the U.S.

Meanwhile, for Mao, the rendezvous provided an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his achievement in transforming the ancient but decayed Chinese social system, in accordance with his socialist ideology. Further, "China sought the breakthrough in relations with the United States because its rivalry with the Soviet Union, with which it shares a long border, had become increasingly bitter."[7] With the knowledge of this historical scenario as a background to the opera and also knowing the librettist's intention to cast the collaboration in the heroic mode, Goodman and Adams' work ought to be interpreted as a political opera – even if the precise bearing of that description is not immediately clear. However, in this opus, the heroic status of the characters is not the sole focus of the piece; of equal importance is the political meaning they convey and this combination determines the spirit of the whole representation.[8] Thus, the libretto of this opera can be considered to function in a similar way to Mao's little red book, in that it can successfully and powerfully convey a political story, though it is one that requires careful interpretation.

Political events like this are "staged" and an opera like *Nixon in China* simply takes the staging one step further – that is, it examines the rituals and symbols in themselves without accepting the pretence of reality or decision. There is more than a suggestion that events have a great momentum in themselves, that the world will follow its course regardless, (see Chou's final aria for example), rather than be the product of the gestures of politicians. As with *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), the ostensible subject of the opera is actually not identical with its real concerns. At the level of narrative it purports to be about the facts of the historic meeting between

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[5] See George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi point out that the meeting was the remedy to "improve American relations with the major powers of the Communist world – China and the Soviet Union – and to shift fundamentally the pattern of the cold war." David Emory Shi and George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History* (New York, Norton: 2000) p. 1216.
[6] See Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution,* p. 491.
[7] See Tindall and Shi note op.cit. p. 1216.
[8] See Jonathon Brown, "Wresting Roles from Fate", *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 – 22 September 1988, p. 1018.

Nixon and Mao but is in reality concerned with the theatre of politics and what sorts of narrative discourse are appropriate to this particular kind of modern media event. The composer also reflects, "*Nixon in China* was for sure the first opera ever to use a staged "media event" as the basis for this dramatic structure […] Both Nixon and Mao were adept manipulators of public opinion, and the second scene of Act I, the famous meeting between Mao and Nixon, brings these two complex figures together face to face in a dialogue that oscillates between philosophical sparring and political one-upmanship."[9] As a result, it is fair to ask that if we were to look at such an event completely from the outside, stripping away the rituals and the symbols, then what sort of description would we give? The emphasis is where it is, not because the nitty-gritty of super-power negotiation is unsuitable to the stage or unworthy of representation – it is rather because the libretto questions what a more truthful (or differently perspectived) narrative would look like.

In traditional mythic narrative, the hero's motivations are often sketchy or opaque: a general desire for glory, a need for revenge or to appease the gods. In more recent literature we have found this approach inadequate as an account of his actions: what were his *real* motives, we ask. Do the details of his personal history matter? Where is the borderline between the personal and the political? Is personal history standing as a surrogate for larger historico-social forces? What is the real locus of action?

In a similar way, kings have always been keen to present themselves as participating in the sacred, for kingship is a religious role as well as a political and social one. The de-sacralisation of politics means that another set of ratifying values is needed to authenticate power and satisfy the people that they are safe. This is largely done through symbols and rituals. This does not mean that nothing happens but that what we are presented with in the dramas of politics is not the same thing as the events they stand in for or should be regarded as a "true account".

The opera by Alice Goodman and John Adams, dramatizes the historical encounter which took place between the two leaders, Richard Nixon and Chairman Mao during Nixon's six days' state visit to China in late February 1972. The piece, as Goodman reflects, "would be an heroic opera – that would be the character of the work – and an opera of character – that had become inevitable – and the heroic

[9] See John Adams, op.cit.

quality of the work as a whole would be determined by the eloquence of each character in his or her own argument."[10] Indeed, although each character in this historically significant meeting not only emanates from entirely different countries and cultural backgrounds they are similar in that each has had to display unusual powers to have arrived at their respective positions and each also possesses a certain kind of superhuman quality, as well as courage and determination in order to bring about that meeting in the first place. But "historical moments" like the Mao\Nixon meeting are constructed by the politicians as mythological events in which the heroic protagonists cut the Gordian knot of international difficulty. To this end they are portrayed as remarkable, exceptional men, capable of such rare and daring feats where lesser men would draw back or fail. Yet they are portrayed, in the final scene in particular, as very ordinary people (especially the Nixons), lost in personal memories and confusions.

Throughout the opera, the characters show a persistent awareness of their roles in the public eye and in the eye of history. But while they cast themselves in heroic roles, actors in a world-historical moment, the atmosphere is not one of tense and detailed negotiations – quite the reverse – but rather of philosophical reflection and the striking of dramatic poses. Initially, all are quite overcome by the glamour of their self-image and a heady euphoria dominates despite the continuous effects of cross-purposes and misunderstanding. These misunderstandings will continue throughout the piece and often lend an air of comic confusion to the proceedings. By the last act, however, all are nearing exhaustion and the mood, while still retaining (especially in the music) a large element of comedy, darkens into reflection and the exploration of memory.

In the opening scene, Goodman immediately establishes the sharp contrast between the Americans and the Chinese officials. In the librettist's portrayal, the Chinese are vastly superior to their visitors in their knowledge and in their grasp of their diplomatic intentions. On the other hand, the Americans have very little intelligence about the hosting nation and their purpose in meeting them. The opening scene of the massed public is the Chinese government's attempt to demonstrate its achievement in adopting the Marxist doctrines, to its American visitors. However, in the libretto the very first encounter between Richard Nixon and Chou En-lai appears

[10] Alice Goodman,.op.cit., p.13.

to be a chaotic situation in which neither of them seems actually to speak to the other. Goodman's text depicts Chou as having a full grasp of the personal background of Kissinger, who, in this first scene, is depicted as merely a messenger. Nixon, on the other hand, is still pre-occupied with the instability of American domestic politics.

> NIXON
> The nation's heartland skips a beat
> As our hands shield the spinning globe
> From the flame-throwers of the mob.

The text clearly reveals Nixon's obsession with the social upheaval resulting from the Vietnam War in America and his determination to make a deal with the Chinese in order to solve the problem. However, in his fascination with "news", he does not realize that his administration has been already out-manoeuvred by the Chinese officials during their very first encounter.

In Goodman's libretto, the chorus in the opening scene is the symbol of the Chinese nation:

> The people are the heroes now
> Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow
> When we look up, the fields are white
> With harvest in the morning light
> And mountain ranges one by one
> Rise red beneath the harvest moon.[11]

The opening verse depicts the Chinese government's desperation to present to its American guests its achievement in building a proletarian China.[12] Goodman uses the biblical allusion of "behemoth" to demonstrate the influence that the CCP has in being able to hail the undistinguished peasants as "the heroes" of the nation. In fact by 1972, China had just begun to calm down from the serial political and ideological revolutions, which were intended by Mao to re-generate the veteran country. "The people are the heroes" is intended as an illustration of Mao's image of a new China, a new society without the rigid conception of feudalism.[13] The verse also displays Mao's grand plan to convert the entire nation into his idealized communist society:

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[11] Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 30.
[12] The chorus initiates the piece by singing, "Soldiers of heaven hold the sky/ The morning breaks and shadows fly/ Follow the orders of the poor/ Your master is the laborer/ Who rules the world with truth and grace/ Deal with him justly, face to face… " Ibid. p. 30.
[13] See John Bryan Starr, *Continuing The Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) p. 261-267.

the land will eventually, "rise red beneath the harvest moon".

Goodman's opening verse is also a reflection of the Chinese government's avowed intention behind its introduction of the commune system, in the Great Leap Forward period: "Pay a fair price for all you buy/ Pay to replace what you destroy/ Divide the landlord's property/ Take nothing from the tenantry…"[14] Even though the introduction of the commune system was largely a catastrophic policy in terms of domestic issues, theoretically the system did provide a perfect propaganda vehicle for the Chinese government to lay before the visiting president of the United States. It enabled the regime to portray the Chinese people as being content with their socialist doctrines and united under Chairman Mao's leadership.[15] As a result, the passage reveals two main purposes of the propagandist attempt. Firstly, it is meant to work at an internal level as the binding force of its people; secondly it also functions as a kind of window-display of a fabricated image of the country, for its foreign visitors.

The *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, which accompanied the launch of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, soon became the doctrine of every walk of life throughout China.[16] In reality, one of the main reasons for the initiation of the Cultural Revolution was a struggle for supreme power within the Chinese Communist Party.[17] The controversial revolution provoked the youngsters to form a rebellious army, the Red Guards**,** in order to bring into practice the chairman's doctrines and overthrow the old Confucian values.[18] Spence notes, "the extent of this outpouring of violence, and the rage of the young Red Guards against their elders, suggest the real depths of frustration that now lay at the heart of Chinese society. The youth needed little urging from Mao to rise up against their parents, teachers, party cadres, and the elderly, and to perform countless acts of calculated sadism. […] To them Mao stood above this fray, all-wise and all-knowing."[19] In order to maintain their hold on power,

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[14] Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 30.
[15] In fact, the commune system was a total calamity according to Linda Benson, "ignorance… lead many communes into agricultural disaster. Cadres ignorant about the rudiments of agriculture advised on planting techniques and, in many instances, proposed impossibly high quotas that were intended to please their superiors and demonstrate enthusiasm for the new system." Linda Benson, *China since 1949* (London: Longman, 2002) p.33; See Michel Oksenberg, "The Political Leader" in *Mao Tse-tung in the Scale of History: A Preliminary Assessment Organized by The China Quarterly* ed. by Dick Wilson, p. 110.
[16] See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, p. 571-578.
[17] See Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution*, p. 197-201.
[18] In the ancient master's writing, *The Analects*, the basic social structure should be "let a ruler be a ruler, a subject a subject, a father a father, and a son a son." Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. by Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 48.
[19] Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, p. 576.

Mao and his loyalists dressed this politically motivated campaign with a grand ideology, "to destroy, once and for all, the old society, and to replace it with a new socialist order led by the generation born and raised under the communist system."[20] The call from the revolutionary leaders to attack the "Four Olds"[21] is well reflected in Goodman's writing:

> MAO
> We no longer need
> Confucius. Let him rot – no curse –
> Words decompose to feed their source –
> Old leaves absorbed into the tree
> To grow again as branches. They
> Sprang from the land, they are alike
> Its food and dung […][22]

Mao's impassioned attack on Chinese traditions seriously shattered the very foundation of its social values, which had been laid down by the ancient philosophers, such as Confucius.[23] Although the Chairman genuinely denounces Confucianism, the librettist's use of the words "no curse" reflects an irony on the librettist's part to describe Mao's apparent attempt to use the diplomatic skill of appeasement but in fact such irony is a camouflage of his real intention to attack ancient Chinese doctrine.[24]

Similarly, in the election year of 1972, Nixon had already begun his third campaign for the presidency. Having previously lost to John F. Kennedy on his first attempt to enter the White House in 1960 and by this time having been president of the United States for four years, Nixon was determined to win his third and final campaign and believed that the key to this success would be to bring about the end of America's long and entangled involvement in the Vietnam conflict By the continuation of conventional military tactics, i.e. heavy bombing, Nixon intended to force the Vietcong into diplomatic negotiations and terminates the conflict.[25] Therefore, Nixon was hoping to obtain a perfect image of "peace with honour" for the United States. During Nixon's first presidency, his military offensive and the

[20] Linda Benson, *China Since 1949*, p. 38.
[21] Four Olds symbolise, old culture, old ideas, old customs and old habits.
[22] Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 36.
[23] See Chang and Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, p. 542.
[24] See Stuart R. Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1963) p. 221-222.
[25] See Vivienne Sanders, *The USA and Vietnam 1945-1975*, 2nd edn (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002) p. 137-140.

"Vietnamisation" (the increase of South Vietnamese military personnel as a percentage of the military) had not proved as effective as planned. Furthermore, with the forthcoming election, Nixon attempted to put a similar political effort into diplomatic negotiation with both Russia and China.[26] He believed that with pressure from these two countries, the Vietcong would finally withdraw from its offensive toward the south. Thus, a Korean-style agreement in which "an armistice under which two separate states would co-exist"[27] could be drawn.

In the libretto, Goodman's text not only displays Nixon's programme, which he hopes to achieve during this state visit to China but also subtly underlines his inability to think clearly for himself - as he arrives at Peking airport:

> NIXON
> [If we don't succeed
> On this summit, our name is mud.
> We're not out of the woods, not yet.]
> The nation's heartland skips a beat
> As our hands shield the spinning globe
> From the flame-throwers of the mob.
> We must press on. We know what we want - [28]

Just as in his later private conversation with Pat, Nixon's vocabulary is heavily reliant upon cliché, which places strong limits on his ability to see his way through the complexities of attitude that lie behind the negotioations. The phrases such as, "our name is mud", "out of the woods" and "skips a beat" clearly reflect the President's weaknesses of self expression. Furthermore, in filling Nixon's speech with platitudes, the librettist has even suggested the character's tendency to cast up smoke-screens in order to gain political advantage. The passage presents an organic metaphor about language, which Goodman perhaps wishes to extend to the very form of her libretto. The librettist's artistic purpose in using cliché points, on both sides of the negotiations, to a decayed rhetoric inadequate to the events they attempt to control.

In the 1968 election, on the basis of having given the American electorate a pledge that he intended to bring about a respectable end to the war in Vietnam, Nixon had finally entered the White House. In fact, Nixon's pledge to end the war in an

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[26] See George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 5th edn (London: Norton, 2000) p. 1216-1218.
[27] See Vivienne Sanders, *The USA and Vietnam 1945-1975*, p.125.
[28] See Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 32.

honourable manner did not indicate that the new President was absolutely against America's involvement in Vietnam. He even expressed the view, that the American government should take the "politically unpopular position" to fight in Vietnam, in order to block the communist expansion. Thus, while it might seem difficult to accept the *volte face* in Nixon's political attitude, from having been an extreme anti-communist politician, to one who had turned into a diplomatic compromiser, setting out to appease the communist regime in China, the Vietnam War can be regarded as the key motive for Nixon's visit to China.[29] Furthermore, Nixon's political ambitions, together with his obsession of gaining a place in world history, are portrayed as contributing towards his intention to make contact with the Chinese authority. The composer also notes that Goodman's "Richard Nixon is our presidential Everyman: banal, pathetic, sentimental, paranoid. Yet she does not deny him an attempt, albeit couched in homely metaphors of space travel and good business practice, to articulate a vision of American life."[30] Nixon's lines in the opera often consist of cliché, the vapid language which has ceased to signify its fundamental purpose; but this, paradoxicaly, enables the narrator to embellish his vague declarations. Cliché in the opera reveals the character's blurring of sincerity with calculation, legitimate ambition with gross political manipulation.

It was clear that the Vietnam conflict was the highest priority on the agenda which Nixon intended to discuss with his Chinese counterpart. However, in actual fact throughout the opera, the American's top issue is barely mentioned.[31] The Chinese officials had already scheduled a number of sightseeing tours, banquets and talks, which in effect raises an insurmountable barrier, preventing Nixon from realising his targeted goal of having in depth discussions on the subject.[32] There are two reasons for this dramatic diversion. The American guests were not given any chance to discuss their priority issue, the Chinese officials having already realised that the American president's eagerness over the Vietnam issue had actually weakened his position.[33] The Chinese were not much interested in solving Nixon's domestic

[29] See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 583.
[30] Ask Des for source.
[31] See Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution*, p. 508-510.
[32] See Chang and Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, p. 601-613.
[33] To quote Tad Szulc's study, a "senior American diplomat who accompanied Nixon to Peking found that Mao's position was both consistent and flexible. 'They long considered that the Vietnam War was the most urgent major problem between us,' he said 'but they understood that it had to run its course. They wanted assurances that the United States was keen on winding down the war, and Nixon gave these assurances." See Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (New York:

problems; they were much more concerned with resolving the problem of the continuing status of Taiwan.[34] Mao had already subtly underlined their interest at his very first meeting with Nixon. Unfortunately, Mao's comments regarding the Chinese interest were only understood by his American counterpart after the Shanghai Communiqué had been signed.[35] This historic event provides the librettist with the dramatic possibility of creating conflicting purposes within the opera. Secondly, Goodman is directing the audience's focus away from the summit in order to draw their attention to the human qualities of these seemingly heroic historic figures.

The result was that the meeting actually did not achieve what it set out to do – a discussion on the subject on the issue of Vietnam. These differences of purpose result in something approaching farce. An example is to be found in the dialogues between Mao and Nixon:

MAO
We're even then.
That is the right way to begin.
Our common old friend Chiang Kai-shek
With all his virtues would not look
Too kindly on all this. We seem
To be beneath the likes of him.
You've seen his latest speech?
NIXON
You bet.
It was a scorcher. Still, he's spit
Into the wind before, and will
Again. That puts it into scale.
You shouldn't despise Chiang.
MAO
No fear
Of that. We've followed his career
For generations. There's not much
Beneath our notice.
CHOU
We will touch

The Viking Press, 1978) p. 517.
[34] See Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: From Revolution to Revolution*, p. 506-510
[35] See Chang and Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, p. 605-607.

On this in our communiqué.[36]

Goodman's text also skilfully underlines that in actual fact the United States and China had very different agendas for the meeting. The passage reflects the situation in which Mao and Nixon constantly talked past each other. The sense of misunderstanding is one of the main themes throughout the opera. The libretto also reveals the naivety and blindness of the American side. The Chinese took full advantage of this as they knew the American was desperately seeking a solution to the Vietnam problem. The librettist wittily hints at Chairman Mao's interest over the issue of Taiwan, by mentioning its leader, Chiang Kai-shek, without underlining his concern on this agenda. Through the phrase, "we seem/ to be beneath the likes of him", the Chairman diplomatically leads the meeting, by drawing Nixon's attention to their common vexations about the Taiwanese issue while playing on Nixon's sense of social insecurity. Moreover, Mao further hints at Chiang's arrogant and pompous character and tactically understates his political position in front of Nixon.

Furthermore, Mao also expresses his acknowledgement of the current developments on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.[37] Even following Mao's affirmation of their knowledge of the events taking place in Taiwan, Nixon still does not appear to apprehend Mao's subtext and the American president misses the opportunity to respond to Mao's main agenda.[38] As a result, Chou En-lai, the Chinese prime minister intelligently re-channels the conversation and hints to his American colleagues, that the Taiwan issue will be discussed at the final stage of the negotiations. The Taiwanese issue had become a stumbling block in Sino-American negotiations.[39] Despite Nixon's ignorance of Mao's intentions, the Chinese agenda over Taiwan does reappear to haunt the American negotiating team and eventually

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[36] Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 33.
[37] See Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 636-641.
[38] See Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p. 261-263.
[39] To quote Szulc's study, "on Tuesday and Wednesday, February 22 and 23, Nixon and Chou were able to outline their understandings on such issues as Vietnam, Korea, Japan and the Indian subcontinent. But Kissinger [American national security adviser] and Chiao had increasing difficulties in putting it all down on paper. While the two drafters struggled with this problem, Nixon and Chou reached on Thursday, February 24, a deadlock over Taiwan…Nixon began wondering if there would be any communiqué at all. Then, after another big banquet on Friday evening, Chou and Chiao drove with Kissinger to a nearby suite of conference rooms for a final negotiation… they spent hour discussing a fresh Chinese proposal on how the Taiwan parts of the communiqué should be drafted. Kissinger thought he liked Chou's idea, but he needed Nixon's clearance. While the Chinese waited, Kissinger returned to the president's quarters to consult with him…[William] Roger [the American Secretary of State], in his only major involvement in the main negotiation, pressed Nixon to adopt wording about Taiwan that would make clear that the United States was not 'dropping' the Nationalists. Nixon mulled it over and agreed. Kissinger went back to the conference table." Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace:*

they have to surrender to the Chinese request, in order to create "the framework for the new Chinese-American relationship."[40]

Nixon in China establishes itself almost immediately as a comedy of cross-purposes: people talking past one another, misunderstanding or just not listening (think of Nixon's meditation on news while he is being introduced to all the party bigwigs) – and this continues right up to the last scene of night-time thoughts and memories. The comic aspect gets almost out of hand in the play scene, act two scene two, with Pat and Dick on stage, Chiang firing her pistol and then singing an aria that can have no connection with the play itself. Most of the scenes are chaotic and the dialogue is frequently non-consequential: people talk past one another, misunderstand or simply make general remarks, or they make speeches. The passage suggests that Mao outsmarts Nixon – though Nixon achieved his main purpose; but it is also the case that Mao is portrayed as being not particularly interested and tending to play games.

Goodman's libretto also adapts this historic event for a dramatic purpose. Mao's unwillingness to discuss all the issues concerning Taiwan is displayed in a playful and masterly exchange of rhyme with the American President, and deflects the conversation into a sly denigration of Kissinger, before directly leading the conversation into more general and philosophical matters:

NIXON
Let us turn our talk towards Taiwan,
Vietnam and the problem there,
Japan –
MAO
Save that for the Premier.
My business is philosophy.
Now Doctor Kissinger –
KISSINGER
Who me?
MAO
– Has made his reputation in
Foreign affairs. [41]

Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years, p. 520.

[40] See Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years*, p. 519.

[41] The passage continues, "Nixon: My right hand man. / You'd never think to look at him/ That he's

The passage also begins an intricate and yet crucial characterization of Henry Kissinger in the opera. The character appears to play only a secondary role as his lines tend to be short and largely factual; and yet historically speaking, he was one of the crucial people in making the meeting become reality. In the opening "dialogue" with Nixon's meditation "News has a kind of mystery" which continues through the introductions until interrupted (and stopped) by Kissinger, Goodman features the character as a bridge between the two parties while maintaining Nixon's grip on negotiating reality during the visit. But the passage above also prepares us for the doubling re-appearance of the Kissinger figure in the role of Lao Szu, the wicked landlord's agent.

Nixon's naivety about the Chinese ability in international diplomatic negotiation is due to his administration's lack of intelligence on the host nation. Although the CIA compiled an analysis of Mao's and Chou's personalities and the State Department had prepared background papers on major policy issues between US and China, this information was systematically sidelined by Kissinger's National Security Council. According to Margaret Macmillan's study, "Kissinger and his NSC staff prepared their own briefing books and sent the President extracts from books and articles which they felt he should read. Nixon did his homework meticulously, bearing down particularly hard in the week just before his trip".[42] The Nixon administration's extraordinary ignorance of and insensitivity to the historical and cultural issues in China were in large part due to weaknesses among these crucial advisors. These weaknesses are further emphasised by the oblique references to Kissenger's self-image as international super-agent and lothario. Indeed, Kissinger is the only character in the piece who is treated with sustained contempt.

At the beginning of act three of *Nixon of China*, the stage directions tell us that those on stage are Dick and Pat Nixon, Chou En-lai, Kissinger and Chiang Ch'ing; the scene is dominated by a portrait of Chairman Mao. Kissinger soon leaves with a stomach upset and after some desultory dialogue, at Chiang Ch'ing's invitation Mao steps out of the picture frame and joins those on stage. Goodman not only uses the scene as some kind of *trompe l'oeil* joke but also as a reflection of the dynamics of this group. Once Kissinger has left the stage the ensemble falls into two groups, Pat

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James Bond. / Chou: And all the time/ He's doing undercover work./ Kissinger: I had a cover. / Mao: In the dark/ All diplomats are gray." Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 33-34.

and Dick on the one side, the rest on the other; for a time Chou moves between the two groups, but increasingly he stands apart, reflecting. The Nixons are pre-occupied with the early days of their marriage when Dick was in the Pacific. There is a suggestion that for both of them this was a character-forming experience of such importance as to set a pattern for their lives. Similarly, the other group recalls the early days of the revolution and the Long March. All are trying to find some significance in their past lives, something other than the mere occurrence of events. All are struggling: Mao's first two statements are "I am no one", and "I am nothing". For Nixon it is: "It's no good. / All that I say is misconstrued." It is Chou, however who in the last speech of the opera gets closer to the matter: "How much of what we did was good? / Everything seems to move beyond / our remedy." Even though these characters have cast themselves as heroic figures who shape and move history, the passage presents the limiting, human side of their characters, people who allow themselves to indulge in moments of nostalgia and bewilderment.

Nixon felt that his visit to China would enable him to have the opportunity to preach his American values and democracy to those Chinese "mobs".[43] Goodman's employment of the rhythmical echo, in his very first soliloquy, further reflects Nixon's self-consciousness that he is making "history":

> It's prime time in the U. S. A.
> Yesterday night. They watch us now;
> The three main networks' colors glow
> Livid through drapes onto the lawn.
> Dishes are washed and homework done,
> The dog and grandma fall asleep,
> A car roars past playing loud pop,
> Is gone. As I look down the road
> I know America is good
> At heart .[44]

Here, the American President knows that he is watched by the U.S. nation (conceived in somewhat Norman Rockwell terms) through the three major television networks. Nixon's arrival on Chinese soil, which was carefully timetabled to coincide with prime time television, suggests that the president is not only fully aware of the value

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[42] See Margaret Macmillan, *Seize The Hour: When Nixon Met Mao* (Beccles: John Murray, 2006) p. 21.
[43] See Chang and Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, p. 608-610.
[44] See Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 32.

of news management but also intentionally performs to the camera for this media event as an iconic patriot. With the help of television broadcasts, Nixon hoped his diplomatic effort to negotiate with the Chinese to bring the end of the Vietnam War would be appreciated by his fellow Americans. This was not wholly unsuccessful, but Richard Nixon's misjudgement of Mao Tse-tung and his misconception of China itself, echoes Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. To quote the author's words, "Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, ruling over it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[45] By broadcasting the President's every move during his visit to China throughout America, Nixon's administration intended to create a political image for its president, that he was a peacemaker and a diplomatic warrior, who was determined to bring to an end the Chinese support for the northern Vietnamese government of Ho Chi-minh.[46]

In Nixon's passage the librettist not only points out the importance of television broadcasting for this Sino-American summit but also implies the propagandist nature of the meeting. The meeting itself was a political spectacle in which the camera and its audience were essential components. All the published photographs of the meeting were choreographed in order to portray this momentous event in the best possible light. However, the actual concrete diplomatic outcomes were trivial. By casting the event as a comedy of misunderstandings *Nixon in China* re-creates and dramatises the would-be mythic encounter between Nixon and Mao. These mythical aspects of the meeting are shown to emerge out of a process of fabrication, not only by the media but also from the activities of both sets of diplomats.

In *Nixon in China*, virtually none of the dialogue or action has any bearing on the political situation or the processes of negotiation. What we get are ritual greetings, generalised encounters, banquets and shows. It suggests that there is a large element of theatricality in politics and that politicians largely deal in narrative myths and symbols (gestures about who is an "enemy" and who is an "ally"). This is especially true of "summits" where the elements of staged appearances, elaborate rituals and exhibitions of concord are paramount. So we have politics as theatre, as symbol and

[45] See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) p. 3.

representation – there is considerable emphasis on the fact that there are virtually no negotiations; instead there are choruses, a banquet, a play. All of these are more ceremony and symbol than they are substance. But when politics becomes theatre, the participants have a problem deciding where reality lies, which is gesture and what is symbol. Rituals and form have taken over.

Something of this has already been mentioned. In the libretto, the high point of the Chinese propaganda effort is encapsulated in the revival of Chiang Ch'ing's production of *The Red Detachment of Women*. The work, which represents Chiang's ambition to reform traditional Chinese opera, received its premiere at 1964 during the height of the Cultural Revolution era.[47] To quote Mao's own words, "the ruthless economic exploitation and political oppression of peasants by the landlords forced them into numerous uprisings against its rule […] It was the class struggles of the peasants, the peasant uprisings and peasant wars that constituted the real motive force of historical development in Chinese feudal society."[48] In Goodman's libretto, Chiang Ch'ing's Chinese opera is turned into a Western style ballet and has been adjusted to become a part of the whole operatic presentation. The political implication, which was already heavily present in Chiang's original, is even more strongly conveyed through the librettist's work. Goodman not only includes Chiang's primary theme but also expands the landlord/peasant struggle into a symbolic battle between the West and the East by featuring the doubled figure of Kissinger as the landlord's "factotum", Lao Szu. The opera elsewhere emphasises that Chiang was an actress by profession. As such, she is eminently suited to act a part in variety of situations; and being the wife of Chairman Mao has given her the role of her life, for which she is well adapted. However, in the opera, her interruption during the performance of her ballet uncovers a moment of mental weakness and uncertainty which would normally be almost undetectable under her imposing persona. The play within the play also puts Kissinger as the main focus of the scene, and not to his advantage. Up to the performance of the ballet, Kissinger is mainly playing a supporting role and acting as a prompter to the president and butt of Mao's little ironic jokes. But in this moment the librettist is for once signalling to the audience over the heads of her characters lest it pass unnoticed amidst the comedy, that all of the main characters in the opera – with

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[46] See Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, p. 91-98.
[47] See Evergreen Keefer, "The Peking Revolutionary Opera" (New York: New York University, 2000)
[48] See Mao, Tse-tung, *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, p. 9.

the exception of Pat – are moral monsters and Kissinger should not be excluded from that company.

During the performance of the ballet, Pat Nixon is presented as an innocent and yet compassionate character and such characterisation is revealed by her response towards *The Red Detachment of Women*:

> KISSINGER (AS LAO SZU)
> Whip her to death!
> PAT
> They can't do that!
> NIXON
> It's just a play.
> She'll get up afterwards, you'll see.
> Easy there, Hon.
> KISSINGER (AS LAO SZU)
> Whip her to death!
> PAT
> It's terrible! I hate you both!
> Make them stop, make them stop!
> NIXON
> Sweetheart,
> Leave them alone, you might get hurt.[49]

Pat's interruption of the ballet is interesting. It would be absurd to suggest that she is so stupid that she does not know a play when she sees one. Through the various responses during the play within the play, Goodman strongly indicates to her audience that they should not mistake opera for reality, neither as a report nor as a direct commentary on the real world. When the audience begins to mistake theatre for reality, they have lost the sense of where the actual meaning behind those theatrical symbols is located and thus will find it impossible to see the value of the piece. Politicians often do not want us to examine symbols too closely, still less to notice that they *are* symbols – that becomes "carping criticism" or even treason. Through portraying the reactions to the ballet, Goodman ironically presents the politicians' worst nightmare, of exposing that the ritualistic symbols of political discourse often lack real value.

Although *Nixon in China* intends to present the historical encounter between

Mao and Nixon in a staged adaptation, the opera still displays stylistic confusions and dramatic ambiguities. Adams' music indeed successfully supports Goodman's text; however his cool jaunty minimalist style of composition does not provide much material for expressive gestures which can be used to elaborate and underline the carefully articulated verbal ironies and dramatic contrasts. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the actual genre of *Nixon in China* also puzzles its audience and invites them to question the librettist and the composer's purpose in treating such a high profile event. The opera can neither be categorised as a comedy nor a satire, because the text mysteriously lacks a focused dramatic statement and the focus on domestic aspects tends to blunt any satirical attacks in favour of gernealised comedy and nostalgia. The portrayal of Richard Nixon appears to be too simplistic and one dimensional for the character to win over either sympathy or contempt from the audience. The final act of the opera in which all the characters are locked in their private thoughts and discussions diffuses the argument, though it deepens the emotional tone. A sense of exhaustion can be felt throughout the act; neither side of the diplomatic corps intends to engage in any further conversation. Such an anti-climax to the plot suggests the whole summit has been something of a farce. This unflattering meta-narrative seems to be the reason behind Goodman's distanced treatment of the meeting.

Chou's final words perhaps reveal the central theme of this dramatised media event.

> CHOU
> How much of what we did was good?
> Everything seems to move beyond
> Our remedy. Come, heal this wound.
> At this hour, nothing can be done.[50]

Throughout he has tended to be the meditative centre of the piece. Yet, .clearly, a man who has earlier spoken calmly of "river of blood" does not mean "good" in any conventional or trivial sense, but in this he approaches one side of the key problem for the revolutionary: how far can any movement which ostensibly begins with a moral purpose allow itself these rivers of blood and retain that original purpose? Can we mortgage the present in favour of a problematic future? What, morally speaking,

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[49] Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China,* Elektra/Nonesuch 7559-79177-2, p. 47.
[50] Ibid. p.57.

justifies our political programme? As will happen again in *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Goodman does not portray her main characters as monster or freaks – indeed it is their very normality that gave such offence in *Klinghoffer*. Similarly, Nixon is shown as an ordinary man: eager, clever and insecure – not the depraved drunkard painted by the American Left.

A related side of the problem is: how far can we predict future outcomes, how far are we in control of events? The participants in political summits like to present themselves as the great shapers of history – but it that true? Is history impelled by other dynamics than the posturing of statesmen? We are all aware that an appearance on prime-time television may be good for the ratings in an election year and that much of politics is show rather than substance; but underneath this perception we harbour the belief that the actions of our leaders must count for something – but the real issue is how much? These relatively ordinary people in the opera are offering themselves as the instigators of vast change: perhaps they are merely reflecting a change that is happening anyway. The event is undoubtedly important, but is it important in the way the characters think it is – because they are present at it? Goodman and Adams invite serious thinking about these questions through the depiction of the historic encounter between Mao Tse-tung and Richard Nixon.

II. An Everlasting Quarrel

The enforced establishment of the modern Israeli state has fuelled the bitter conflict between western colonial power and the Arab world.[51] Furthermore, it also triggered a chain of events which has seriously threatened world security and the delicately balanced relationship between the west and the Arab states.[52] As they became increasingly frustrated and disillusioned at the lack of progress, the various Palestinian groups planned and perpetrated ever-escalating attention-seeking incidents, frequently involving innocent air travellers by the early nineteen

[51] According to Calvin Goldscheider, "over time, these first pioneers [Jewish investors] hired Arab laborers, and many of the Jewish immigrants became administrators. On the surface, the new settlers appeared similar to European colonialists, exploiting cheap labor for the benefit of colonialists. Some of the consequences of a colonial relationship between Jews and Arabs emerged during this early period." See Calvin Goldscheider, *Culture in Conflict: The Arab-Israeli Conflict* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002) p. 4.

[52] See James P. Warburg, *Crosscurrents in the Middle East* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1969) p. 3-7.

seventies.[53] To quote Andrea Nüsse, "confronted with the perceived isolation of their struggle on all levels, the only means to reach the proclaimed goal was *Jihād* – according to the Islamists' interpretation of the *Sharī'a*. It found expression in the form of the *Intifāda*."[54]

Ten years prior to the events of September the eleventh 2001, the Arab-Israeli conflict had already featured as the main subject in John Adams and Alice Goodman's operatic collaboration, *The Death of Klinghoffer,* which received its premier in Brussels in 1991. Like Adams and Goodman's first opera, *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer* is also based on an actual event, the hijacking of the Italian cruise liner *Achille Lauro* in 1985. The attack was planned and carried out by a group of Palestinian guerrilla fighters, as a protest against the western world's failure to deal with the Palestinian question and this event brought the plight of the Palestinian people into the spotlight once again.[55] Although the hijacking was not authorised by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which is generally recognized throughout the world as the official representative of the people of Palestine, this daring coup by the guerrilla fighters did successfully reveal the desperation of the ordinary Palestinians and their determination to have their voice and situation brought to the attention of the world's media and political leaders.[56]

When we say that a play, novel or poem is "about" something we are using a short-hand that conceals a large number of issues which need to be kept distinct in our mind, though not necessarily explicitly on the page every time the matter arises. There is something obviously odd occurring when we say that *Tom Jones* is about a man call Tom Jones; this person never existed. In such a case we are inclined to generalize a little and say that the novel is about what it would be like to be a young man in certain circumstances, and what adventures might ensue as he goes abroad in such a society. This is, of course, a very flat-footed way of talking about fiction, but from the critical point of view, such an account at least gives rise to the question as to why these particular attributes have been imposed by the author on his central

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[53] See "Arabs Open Fire at Athens Airport, Killing Three and Wounding 55", *The Times*, 6 August 1973, p. 1; "Arabs Terrorists Admit They Attacked Wrong Group of Passengers at Athens Airport", *The Times*, 7 August 1973, p.5; "30 Killed in Airport Attack", *The Times*, 18 December 1973, p. 1; "Hostages Set Free as Hijackers Surrender", *The Times*, 19 December 1973, p. 1.

[54] See Andrea Nüsse, *Muslim Palestine: The Ideology of Hamas* (London: Routledge Curzon, 1998) p. 67.

[55] See Paul Cossali, "Arab-Israeli Relations 1967-2001" in *A Survey of Arab-Israeli Relations 1947-2001,* ed. by David Lea (London: Europa Publications Limited, 2002) p. 87.

[56] See Henry Cattan, *The Palestine Question* (Beckenham, Croom Helm Ltd, 1988) p. 120-121.

character – and we ask this question because the answer gives us a clue as to what, in a manner of speaking, the book is "really about". And in this we are suggesting that the 'aboutness' of the book is not quite connected to the ostensible subject, but is located elsewhere, closer to the realm of interpretation.

Things get more complicated with real or historical figures. Is the play *Macbeth* in any sense about the actual person named Macbeth? The answer will be yes and no. It is obvious that it would not be a valid criticism of the play to say that the real Macbeth was a nice man and kind to children – that would surely miss the point. Yet it does not seem a complete mistake when we say that a play is not historically accurate. This latter remark has more force as we have more knowledge of the real history behind it. But again, there are no hard lines to be drawn – even if only because we adopt different critical strategies according to circumstances. If Margaret in *Powder her Face* arrived on stage riding a purple dragon we should simply know that we have moved out of the literal and into the figurative – in which case the 'aboutness' is not located in strict matters of fact. Other cases are less clear and adjustments have to be made accordingly. What we do know, is that historical accuracy is not as primary as it would be if one were writing a purportedly truthful historical account - there the space between fact and interpretation is more explicit, obvious and crucial, though still not at all simple. It does seem fair to say, however, that the reader should feel able to draw the distinction and that fact and interpretation should not be so blurred that the reader has severe difficulty in telling them apart. But again, the "interpretation" offered by a play is not at all the same as the interpretation offered by the historian.

The relationship to history is further complicated by notions of what might count as reasonable background knowledge. Details of the lives of Anthony and Cleopatra have a good deal of room for manoeuvre because we know so little about them. As a result, they are moving towards the realm of legend or even myth and requirements there are quite different. We have little such room in the case, say, of Henry James about whom we know a very great deal. There is thus a sliding scale and different approaches apply in each case. What is clear, however, is that we cannot simply say that the play *Macbeth* is rubbish just because the historical details are inaccurate or disputable. The play is not 'about' history in that sense. With *Richard II* we are inclined to use words like 'propaganda' as a short way of indicating that interpretation is taking a strong part in the proceedings – perhaps to the point of

distortion of "reality". Of course, in all this, the line between fact and interpretation is not at all as strong as it might sometimes seem, but it is a useful distinction and we should hang on to it as much as we can.

The Death of Klinghoffer has some of the same problems as *Powder Her Face,* in being built on real life events: real life tends not to provide the kind of narrative-dramatic arc that we seem to need in art. In the case of *Klinghoffer* the whole sequence is particularly indecisive – not only is there little real narrative, the opera ends rather abruptly with the lament of Mrs. Klinghoffer. Even here there is a problem of dramatic balance – is this long aria meant as a kind of emotional resumé? But this does not quite meet the case because the whole opera makes no pretence at being particularly dramatic – indeed the action is deliberately, determinedly static. Again, it is difficult to know what the fight between Omar and Molqi is supposed to be like, certainly not at a realistic level. At the dramatic level, there is no particular problem with the death of Klinghoffer happening off-stage, something that is normal in Greek drama; it is rather the whole surrounding circumstance is never exploited for dramatic possibility. This raises a question as to what is to be thought of as the focus of attention, perhaps something other than significant action. The choruses are also very distant from the action: their comments are at several removes from what the characters do or say. Unlike a Greek chorus, they do not comment directly on the action – their remarks are more like poetic meditation – rather formal in language and lacking in local specific detail. The two antiphonal choruses at the beginning establish the dramatic context of the opera and but then go on to tell the audience that the action they are about to witness is not actually real. Indeed, in the opening choruses the librettist is at some pains to suggest that the opera is not really about the hijacking incident but is a meditative reflection on the subject of human suffering.

In Goodman's libretto, the Palestinian people do exist; indeed they have even been given a voice to enable them to express their sufferings. From its inception *The Death of Klinghoffer* has caused a great deal of controversy throughout those countries where there is a strong, vocal, Jewish presence able to exert political force, such as the United Sates of America.[57] By starting the work with the voice of the

[57] According to Andrew Clements, "the opera, and particularly Goodman's refusal to condemn the Palestinians or take sides in her libretto, cause a predictable political furore at the time of the premiere at La Monnaie in Brussels in 1991, and as a result several opera companies that had originally shared the commission with the Brussels house abandoned plans to stage the production." See Andrew Clements, "Opera for Today" in the programme for an Edinburgh International Festival and Scottish

exiled Palestinians, as opposed to the Jewish victims, Goodman has carefully laid out the general tone of the opera, in which the librettist not only intends to give the Palestinians a voice but also places them before the voice of the exiled Jews. In so doing, the librettist clearly intends to invite the readers/listeners to view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a different point of view.

> My father's house was razed
> In nineteen forty-eight
> When the Israelis passed
> Over our street.[58]

The passage directly points to the monumental ancestral foundations of the conflict and underlines the enormity of the consequence of the 1948 war, which led to the formation of the modern Israeli state. The librettist presents the contemporary historical event in terms borrowed from *Exodus* in order to associate the Palestinians' present suffering with the trials and tribulations of the Israeli's ancestors in the Biblical account of the escape from Egypt. The poetic intention is materialised by the use of enjambments in the last two lines of the stanza. In so doing, Goodman creates an effective run on allusion which suggests the angel of Death passing over both Israelite and Palestinians' streets.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah shows no mercy to the pagan Egyptian race by smiting all the "firstborn" throughout the entire country yet sparing the obedient Israelites:

> For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the first born in the land of Egypt […] and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment […] and the blood shall be to you for a token upon the house where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.[59]

The opening stanza in *The Death of Klinghoffer,* also bears an undeniable resemblance to the second line of Geoffrey Hill's "September Song": "Not forgotten/ or passed over at the proper time."[60] Hill's poem is a remembrance of the holocaust through the the story of the deportation of a ten years old child on 24th September

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Opera production of *The Death of Klinghoffer* in 2005.
[58] Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p. 86
[59] Exodus, 12: 12-13.
[60] See Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (Reading: Penguin Books, 1985) p. 67.

1942. Goodman's allusion to "September Song" concentrates on the smaller details of a larger Jewish tragedy which she incorporates into her libretto. The borrowing of Hill's poetic style is another indication that the libretto's horizons are going to be expanded well beyond the contingencies of the narrative and that both words and music have larger ambitions.[61]

This opening phrase in Goodman's libretto, "my father's house was razed/ in nineteen forty-eight", can lead us into two readings. Firstly, we can view this as a literal phrase, indicating the total loss and destruction of the narrator's physical property and possessions. But the method invites us to also take it as symbolising Palestinians' loss of nationhood, consequent upon the enforced creation of the modern Israel. Further, the exiled Palestinian's lament, immediately invites readers/listeners to associate and compare the piece with the Hebrew chorus in Temistocle Solera and Guiseppe Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842), which is the mirror of the Palestinian situation.

After the chorus of the exiled Palestinians, the librettist immediately features the chorus of the exiled Jews:

> When I paid off the taxi, I had no money left,
> and, of course, no luggage. My empty hands shall
> signify this passion, which itself remembers.
>
> O Daughter of Zion, when you lay upon my breast
> I was like a soldier who lies beneath the earth
> of his homeland, resolved.[62]

Through these two stanzas, the librettist points out the Jewish age-old obsession with re-creating their long lost nation and their willingness to fight in order to make their dream become a reality. The narrator clearly spent all his savings in order to return to his ancestral homeland, therefore, he would have "no money left" after "paid off the taxi." The speaker's sheer passion for reconstructing his long vanished nation is reflected in the words the librettist employed, such as "no luggage" and "empty hand". In this opening passage from the chorus of exiled Jews, Goodman not only depicts the zealousness of the exiles' desire to form their own nation but also indicates some of the various sources behind the Zionist movement. In order to answer their

[61] See Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1971) p. 74-100.
[62] Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p.88

ancestors' call to "resolve" their long aspiration in reclaiming the lost land, modern exiled Jews are determined to re-build their ancestors' promised nation.

Inspired by European nationalism in the nineteenth century[63], the diasporic Jews around the world began to conjure up new ideas about their identity, religion, culture and most important of all, their sense of nationhood.[64] The political Zionists' first diplomatic success in creating the modern Israeli state can be traced back to the issuing of the Balfour Declaration,[65] which endorses the Jewish people's aspiration to re-build their long lost nation in Palestine

Surveying this from a historical viewpoint, it is not difficult to understand why little recollection of any Jewish existence remains to be found in this symbolic land of Palestine, the subjugated Jews having been removed by their Roman rulers during the late first century AD. Thus, the political Zionist's strongly asserted historical claim upon the Palestinian lands can only be traced to their own fervent religious beliefs. To quote the book of Ezekiel 37:21-22 in the Old Testament:

> And say unto them, Thus, saith the Lord God; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all.

With their belief in this promise from Jehovah dating back to the time of the Old Testament, many religious Zionists will not contemplate allowing any other state to

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[63] According to Kirsten E. Schulze, "classical Zionism was rooted in the traditional ties Jews in the Diaspora proclaimed to the Land of Israel, and the belief that Jewish independence would be restored with the coming of Messiah. Within the framework of the European enlightenment, the French Revolution, and new concepts of citizenship and political life, and against the back drop of centuries of inequality and persecution, classical Zionism started to be transformed into modern political Zionism." Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 1.

[64] A new form of Zionist movement started to emerge and its basic argument as Schulze notes, was "the Jewish people constituted a nation and this nationhood needed to be reaffirmed; assimilation was rejected as it was neither desirable nor was it deemed to be possible; anti-semitism could only be overcome by physical separation from Europe and by self-determination and religious and cultural ties to the Land of Israel 'made Palestine the logical territorial claim." Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict,* p. 1-2.

[65] The Balfour Declaration (1917): "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a "national home" for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious right of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the right and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country." Ibid. p.98.

co-exist on the same land with their promised nation.[66] Secular Zionists tended to take a similar stance and, as a result, the Israeli government found itself employing every possible method to seize what they regarded as their God-given land and it was this, which arguably led to the cause of the five territorial wars, following upon the UN partition resolution on Palestine of 1948.[67]

Thus, the two choruses in the prologue immediately divert the audience's attention from the supposedly main action of the opera, the hijacking incident, and establish a generalised, almost static tone for the entire piece. The prologue also neatly demonstrates the libretto's lack of dramatic impulse and event; in fact there is virtually no action at all in the opera. Apart from the "fight" already mentioned, the most dramatic thing that happens is that at one stage "Rambo" abuses the Jewish/American/English group of passengers and later throws some money about. Even the killing of Klinghoffer takes place off-stage and is not structured to act as any sort of climax or focal point – indeed his corpse makes a guest appearance which distracts even more from the sense of literal action. As in *Nixon*, the style of the music also inclines to the static, detached and cool. This sense of stasis is increased by the fact that there is no continuous or linear time-frame – quite a number of the speeches/arias are taking place at some unspecified time *after* the ship's hijacking has concluded. For example, the Captain's opening narrative is set at some indefinite time later and is telling of events that have already happened and been resolved. So too with the First Officer, the Austrian Woman and the British Dancing Girl: they add bits to the narrative, but all from a later perspective. Of course, the audience will have a good idea of the events surrounding the actual hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* and that Klinghoffer will be murdered; to that extent there can be no major narrative suprises, but the scene-setting narrations seem calculated to remove any local or dramatic suspence that might have been generated - all is finished and the danger has passed. Yet the narrative impulse is not entirely suppressed and are to be found in part in the mythic elements: the framing choruses are clearly intended to create a

[66] According to Goldscheinder, "immigration patterns over the last century reveal how Jews and Arabs have differed sharply over the meaning and implications of Jewish immigration. More important, immigrations has been a powerful symbol of controversy throughout the conflict. For Jews, the need for immigration was the raison d'etre of establishing a Jewish state. For Arabs, Jewish immigration to Palestine and Israel meant disenfranchisement, the entry of foreigner into their land, and their own displacement." See Goldscheinder, *Cultures in Conflict: The Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p.18.

[67] See Benny Morris, "Revisiting the Palestinian exodus of 1948" in *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948* ed. by Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 37-39.

context, which, like the *Iliad's* treatment of the Trojan war, allows for an appreciation of the position of each side, without feeling any need to come down strongly in favour of one or the other. Indeed, it would be against the point of the opera to do so, as the general view is that suffering is a fixed element of all human experience.

The Death of Klinghoffer not only lacks events but there is also a lack of overall shaping structure. Normally, narratives have a pattern: a situation is established situation, conflicts or problems emerge from within that situation, action is taken to resolve the conflict and then finally a resolution is achieved. In this narrative pattern, the resolution brings about some understanding and settlement of the conflict and the situation either returns to something like the *status quo ante* or moves into some higher synthesis or understanding. This opera offers us the first two elements, very little of the third and nothing of the fourth at the level of narrative. Furthermore, when the audience does witness apparent action in the dramatic present, any sense of urgency is dispelled by the poetic and meditative nature of the characters' speech – indeed there is a strong tendency for all the characters (except "Rambo" who is only thuggish and Molqi who is very business-like) to sound pretty much the same: other than on those occasions when they discuss the particularities of the situation, they tend to offer abstract and highly generalized meditations on evil, suffering and loss. In this they are like the choruses in the Prologue and at the end of each scene; these choruses scarcely notice the action and events of the hijacking, but offer distancing and distanced contemplations – for the most part with a Biblical theme. Moreover the language of these meditations is in a register and pitch of complexity that would defy understanding in the performance context. No wonder that people have concentrated on the death of Klinghoffer which is one of the few easily understandable features in the entire work.

There is also a denial of narrative satisfaction in the ending of the opera when the hijacking simply comes to an end with no attempt at either climax resolution or rounding off. Mamoud announces "It's over. It's done" and the Palestinians disembark, for all the world like departing passengers. Then, as already noted, the opera ends abruptly with the lament of Mrs. Klinghoffer. But that lament, from a narrative point of view, is too particular in that it does not and cannot address itself to the issues raised by either the ostensible topic of the narrative or the more generalised concerns of the choruses and however much sympathy the audience may feel for either Mr. or Mrs. Klinghoffer, they are not given enough weight or significance as

people to bear a substantial symbolic burden, especially as the libretto seems unwilling to take sides in the fundamental dispute. Mrs. Klinghoffer's long arioso does not form any kind of dramatic conclusion – it simply presents us with yet another instance of raw, unexplainable suffering. One might have reasonably supposed that this would link back into an exploration of the suffering arising from the terrible conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, and in a way it does – but at a very considerable distance. There is no attempt to view the differing points of view as if even potentially solvable, because there is no real attempt to understand, let alone arbitrate; further, the potential for dramatic confrontation and examination is, in practice, deliberately denied and we are offered instead an oratorio-like set of meditations on the nature of suffering and evil.

Instead of delving into current details, the roots of the dispute between the Palestinians and the Israelis, which constitutes the springboard to the central theme of the piece, is traced back to the ancient biblical struggle between Ishmael and Isaac, the sons of Abraham, reports of which can be found in the book of Genesis.[68] In this account, Isaac's mother, Sarah, afforded him her maternal protection by deporting Hagar and Ishmael from the family land, thus securing his position as the future legitimate head of the family.[69] For the action of the opera, the implication seems to be, that since the Palestinian question has already been in existence since the dawn of civilization, it would be futile to attempt any resolution in a single operatic presentation. The distancing tone of the choruses has the effect of equally distancing the Jewish/Palestinian struggle. In the opera, the struggle is placed in such an abstract and quasi-eternal context that it almost ceases to feel like a present all-consuming conflict and risks turning the terrorists into common criminals or sadists (of which there is more than a hint in the name "Rambo"). Or it places the opera into a different area in which the particularities of the politics are submerged and we have a meditation on irreconcilable suffering. In which case, no solution can be offered.

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[68] However, according to the Old Testament the two sons of Abraham have been promised totally different destinies. "And the angel of the Lord said unto her [Hagar], Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren." Genesis 16: 11-12.

[69] "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac…And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called." Genesis 21: 9-10, 12.

The audience might begin with a presupposition that because Jews and Muslims are both inheritors of a common Abrahamic religion that there is some potentiality for understanding in the overarching Biblical context, but this seems to be an illusion – at least in so far as the opera is concerned. The dense obscurities of the story of Hagar add to the perplexities rather than present a way out of them. As a result the libretto largely presents suffering as absolute and beyond understanding. When Mamoud says:

> Where Almighty God
> In His mercy showed
> My decapitated
> Brother to me[70]

he seems to be presenting this without irony or further illumination. This passivity of response is on a par with the stasis of the action. Similarly, the historic sufferings of the Diaspora Jews are presented as simply equivalent to that of the contemporary Palestinians. The problem here is not that the suffering was not real but that we are being placed in some kind of eternal timeless present – and if all time is present, then all time is irredeemable.

There is a further hint to way the opera is working in the fact that Adams and Goodman looked to the great passions of J. S. Bach for their inspiration as to the basic structure of their second operatic collaboration. The dramatic structure of *The Death of Klinghoffer* echoes in particular the *St. Matthew-Passion,* (1727) which innovatively adapts the dramatic function of the chorus in its overall representation[71]. By featuring a double chorus (*due cori*), the composer would be able to materialise his concept of composing the dialogue between "Daughter of Zion" and the "Faithful".[72] Cutting acrosss the grain of this structure are the single choruses commenting on and amplifying the material from Narrator and Jesus. This gives Bach a great deal of freedom and opportunity for complex responses. Goodman adopts the dialectic design of the passion and transforms it into a theatrical conversation between the "Exiled Palestinians" and the "Exiled Jews" on the one hand and the meditative unified choruses which begin and end each act. This dialogic

[70] See *The Death of Klinghoffer*, act I, scene ii.
[71] See Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 291-292; Eric Chafe, *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) p. 361-390.
[72] See Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, p. 296-297.

structure is promising: on the one hand there are the Israelis, totally committed in their passion for the building of a Jewish state, which they believe to have been promised to them at the dawn of civilization.[73] On the other side, the Palestinians are eager to be in receipt of an even-handed treatment, in line with that given to the newly arrived Jewish immigrants.[74] The double chorus musical structure pioneered by Bach gives Adams and Goodman a striking means of accommodating the various facets of this profoundly difficult conflict.[75]

Moreover, by presenting a dialectical presentation of the Palestinians and the Jews, Adams and Goodman immediately connect their opus, not only with western musical tradition but also with the occidental literary tradition. To quote Michael Steinberg's study, "the commentary…falls into two divisions, one complex, the other simple. The former consists of the arias and choruses with their newly invented elaborate poetry and their involved musical textures and designs; the latter is found in the congregational hymns from childhood. Moreover, these two categories can overlap when a congregational hymn is superimposed on a chorus or aria. Part of the time we attend to the telling of a story, but often the story stops and we are bidden to reflect on its meaning."[76] It is a measure of Goodman's ambition that the work, in its structural representation, positions itself as a modern embodiment of Bach's *St. Mathew-Passion*.

Like the double choruses in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion,* in which the featured choruses summon dialogues on the theme of the celestial world, the chorus in *The Death of Klinghoffer* is also divided into two musical forces, in order to image the Israeli-Palestinian debate. Moreover, the two choruses are also combined to form a single voice, as in both the *Passion* and ancient Greek theatre[77], to allow for

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[73] See Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist - Arab Conflict 1881-2001*, p. 3-6.
[74] See Warburg, *Crosscurrents in the Middle East*, p. 22-27.
[75] To quote Wolfgang Sandberger's study on the use of double chorus in Bach's *St Matthew Passion*: "The uniqueness of the St Matthew Passion rests not only on its monumentality but also on its overall conception, a conception based in turn upon its use of a double chorus. Bach himself drew explicit attention to this feature of the work when he added the words "a due cori" to the title-page of Part Two. It may well have been Christian Friedrich Henrici's libretto that encouraged this approach on Bach's part, inasmuch as the text represents a contemplative dialogue between the daughter of Zion and the faithful…none of the many other composers who set this text – Keiser, Handel, Mattheson, Telemann or Stölzel – hit upon the idea of using a double chorus." Wolfgang Sandberger, "The 'great Passion'", CD booklet for Bach's *Matthäus-Passion*, Teldec 8573-81036-2, p.14
[76] Michael Steinberg, book note for *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p. 11
[77] According to P. E. Eastering, "the fact that choruses danced as well as sang is of enormous importance for the understanding both of tragedy as an art-form and of its relation to the festivals and the community to which it belonged. The immediate sensuous appeal of the choral performance, the *thelxis*, or enchantment, of the costumes, masks, dancing, song and its musical accompaniment, must

comments on subjects of concern. To this end, there are four chorus numbers to conclude the first two scenes of each act and these are given motifs by four natural features which are employed to name the relevant verse, namely, ocean, night, desert and day.

Take the ocean chorus in act one scene one as an example, illuminated as it clearly is by the first chapter of the book of Genesis in the Old Testament. In it, the librettist deliberately reflects on the division which God already created at the very first stage of the creation of the whole world, a division which lies at the very core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

> Is not the ocean itself their past?
> Landscape of night for Him
> Who is called All-Seeing, untouched
> by storms, deep-silted with the motes
> of carrion which stand for light. […]
> Here is a semblance of the first man;
> sinewy, translucent, thick with life,
> superficially violent, inwardly calm.[78]

As the hijacked *Achille Lauro* sails into an unknown future in act one scene one, this ocean chorus is placed immediately after the hijacking and would seem to offer an opportunity to pass comment on this new situation. As can be seen in this passage the librettist promptly turns *Achille Lauro* into a mythic symbol which representing the entire world. It might be thought that the introduction of material from The Garden of Eden might be intended to provide an overarching context – perhaps one that Arabs, Christians and Jews could all subscribe to. However, despite her status as an Anglican priest, Goodman clearly does not want the narrative of the Fall to be read in anything other than a generally symbolic way in which the Fall is an account not of a particular quasi-historical event but of the generality of evil and suffering. Its meaning once grasped, the narrative itself can be discarded. The passage also reflects upon the biblical account of the creation of the earth. The librettist associates the cruise ship's journey through the night into the Mediterranean, with the chaos prior to the world's beginning. The "All-Seeing" originates the universe and employs his own

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not be overlooked when we try to trace the history of the chorus in tragedy. This must be a major reason why the musical element did not vanish from Greek tragic plays as the spoken part became more complex and elaborate." P. E. Eastering, "Form and Performance" in *The Cambridge Companion of Greek Tragedy* ed. by P. E. Eastering (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.156.

image to create the first human being. In this passage Goodman uses an exhalable consonant, [s] in the passage in order to correspond with the mystic and yet intimate atmosphere. As the narrators recite the text, the whispering quality of the consonant, can be regarded as the Creator's first breath to generate the entire world.[79]

After employing the reference of the creation of the world in the ocean chorus, Goodman then further develops the idea by elaborating the first tripartite relationship in the Old Testament: namely, Adam, Eve and "the voice of spirit" in order to develop her argument on the division of the human races.

> This is the night of his wedding.
> His extremities reek of his wife,
> flesh of his flesh, a rib of sand,
> who is listening, not to his voice
> but to the voice of spirits, and waiting
> for the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil
> to climb down from the trees.[80]

The passage is an echo of the second and third chapters of Genesis, which give the full account of the creation of the first human couple, Adam and Eve and the Fall. As a consequence of listening to the voice of the spirits, Eve partakes of the forbidden fruit, an action which directly leads her and Adam to experience shame and gain knowledge of good and evil. "And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become one of us, knows good and evil: and now lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden."[81] By highlighting the Fall, the librettist places the action into the context of the general origin of evil and links it the suffering which is thereby permanently embedded in human nature. In this light, the Palestinian and Israeli conflicts are seen as part of human suffering which will always exist.

It is clear that the events of the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* are not the real focus of the librettist's interest, but rather that they a pretext for discussion of wider

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[78] Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p. 102.
[79] According to the book of Genesis 1-2, the ocean is one of the initial creations brought into being by the spirit of God, "in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the water." As the first verse in the bible reveals, "god created the heaven and the earth". Not only did God initiate the world but also created the divisions, which accompanied all of his further creations. Because the ocean can be regarded as the original element, Goodman uses this natural element as a symbol to initiate the actual action of the piece.
[80] op cit. p. 102.
[81] See Genesis 3:22

themes that have something to do with the generality and unavoidability of suffering, a suffering that may be a consequence of the Fall (as an origin of Evil) or, more locally, may be a consequence of straying from the path of righteousness. And overall the impression remains that, by employing Bach's passion as the structural foundation of the opera, the composer and the librettist are attempting to bring a humane and even serene overview in their approach to and handling of the Israeli-Palestinian political struggle. The difference is, however, that Bach, while certainly not avoiding the reality of suffering, has his resolution in place in the accepted transcendence of the Passion. No such resolution is available in *Klinghoffer*. The exclusive invocation of the savage and bad-tempered God of the Old Testament is not encouraging of hope, and whether it would contribute much to patience may be honestly doubted.

This view of the opera highlights two problems: it is not the case that the failure of dramatic structure comes about because the plot is based on real events; for while it is typically the case that real events do not have the neatness of many fictional situations – life goes on, as they say – that does not mean that having real situations as one's material relieves the artist of the responsibility to create a viable form; indeed, that might be regarded as the basic challenge. What one would hope to see is some form being imposed on the material, either directly or through focus on some subsidiary characters, as Tolstoy does in *War and Peace*. But the distance and the passivity to be seen in this work prevent this. It is as if the librettist feels she can do nothing with her material but meditate upon it in a detached and non-interventionist manner.

Secondly, dramatic motifs take their meaning from context. Therefore, in a work like *The Death of Klinghoffer* the notions like "myth", "victim", "sacrifice" or "martyr" should get their proper meaning from the context (ideological, political, social and physical) in which they are located; as we saw with *Greek*, if that context is corrupted or ignored, all the meaning departs with it and we are left with an unintelligible story that cannot bear the burden of its mythic references. In *The Death of Klinghoffer*, at one level, Goodman appears to suggest that the common Biblical background would have supplied enough contexts for both sides (and she has tried to help this along by making Mamoud, for example, considerably more religious than he was in real life), but it simply does not work like that. A concept like martyrdom can only function in a tightly defined context where there is shared belief – a generalized religious atmosphere will not do it. One man's martyr becomes another's senseless

fanatic – especially when he is in the business of destroying people's lives or livelihood. In addition, it should be noted that contexts are used to justify as well as explain. This is the reason for the outcry from some Jewish organizations in the US: whether or not they had seen the opera, they understood that any thoroughgoing attempt to understand the actions of the Palestinians would, in dramatic terms, go some distance towards justifying them – and that is simply unacceptable to them – after all, a good deal of the Old Testament is dedicated to the proposition that the children of Israel have a positive duty to displace the indigenous peoples of Palestine: God told them to.

It is not to be supposed that Goodman was ignorant of the bearing of the Isaac/Ishmael dichotomy, indeed it probably lies behind much of the thinking in the libretto, but it does not in itself present any material for synthesis or resolution. We have, instead, two archaic and ancestral opposing world-views with no overarching synthesis on offer. There are, however, a number of other world views on offer which are not related to either side of the dispute – and this multiplicity further highlights the passivity of the libretto's stance, its lack of dramatic structure or impulse.

An allied feature of *The Death of Klinghoffer* is its subversion of the role of victim, the denial of sacrifice and thus of focus. Klinghoffer himself is a cipher – wheeled on and off but without much to contribute, even when he appears in ghostly form. When he is shot (off stage) it seem to be as a passenger, and not particularly as a Jew, so despite the opportunities offered to the librettist, he is not a presented as a participant in the background struggle which is at the centre of the hijacking. To that extent he seems an accidental bystander who had the misfortune to antagonise one of the more unstable of his captors. His greatest part is found in the lament of Mrs. Klinghoffer. The rest of the cast, such as The Captain, An Austrian Woman and British Dancing Girl are likewise evacuated of character. Again we see the dominance of Theme over action.

If the chorus numbers in *The Death of Klinghoffer* create the basic skeletal framework of the opus, the arias allotted to each individual role, can be considered to represent the fleshed out structure of the main narrative of the opera. Although the proximate occasion of the opera is a reflection on the contemporary and indeed still ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is highlighted by the use of the chorus, it is the characters in the opera, who bring out such drama as there is and who materialise and convey the intellectual debates to the audience. In the opera, as Steinberg reveals,

"each character has [its] moment."[82] So, by compiling each character's own view on the incident, the librettist is able to incorporate dramatic elements in the opera while evoking the actions and excitement from these arias, in order to maintain the audience's interest, whilst being immersed in the spectacle. The view of the cruise ship as symbolising the whole world, in which each character has its own view and standpoint on the middle-east conflict is reinforced by the typicality of their titles. Take, for example, the Austrian Woman's aria:

> I kept my distance. That seemed best.
> There was a burst of shooting just
> As I was stepping in the tub.
> I froze. My heart began to throb
> Violently. I had to lie
> Down on the bathmat for a few
> Minutes until I felt composed.[83]

From the Austrian Woman's aria, listeners/ readers are offered a self-reflective view of the hijacking event from the perspective of one of the detained passengers. The entire passage strongly features the plosive consonants, [b] and [p] which encapsulate the sound of disruption. It could be argued that by using these specific consonants, Goodman is provoking not only the character but also the audience's inner fear of the potential bomb attack by the terrorists. The Austrian Woman's fear culminates in her revelation, "I thought they would blow up the ship." As her inner terror explodes, she starts to envisage her own death. The woman's selfishness is also expressed through the librettist's text: "I'd rather die alone", which hints at the character's self-centred personality and also confirms her detestation of her fellow passengers.

The fact that the name of the Austrian Woman is never revealed, can be read as an indication of the librettist's intention to employ the character's attitude, as a representation of one part of the world's opinion on (and general indifference to) the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. As for the character, her only concern is for her own personal safety and she cares neither about the current situation she finds herself in, nor even about the political rivalry, which directly led to the incident. The character

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[82] Ibid, p. 16.

[83] The Austrian woman continues, "I thought they would blow up the ship, / And I'd begin to feel it list. / I prayed and sweated through the worst. / Even if one were going to die/ One would avoid the company/ Of idiots. During the war/ I felt the same. I have no fear/ Of death. I'd rather die alone, / If I must, though I'd hat to drown." Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p. 114.

can be read as a surrogate for the narrowly self-absorbed people to be found throughout the world. Moreover, the Austrian Woman's aria also provides a different aspect on the notion of composition. Goodman's use of the word "lie", reveals something of the woman's character. The Austrian Woman, who is either elderly or in late middle age, has to "lie" down in order to regain her sense of composure, which suggests the way to be composed is to be becalmed or pretend that nothing is happening. Her age and nationality are surely significant to the twinned notions of lie and lying down.

Through the soliloquy of the Austrian woman, the librettist arguably presents a different kind of disengagement in the libretto. For this character, her sense of composure arises from indifference towards others and can only arrive after her sense of reason takes precedence over her fleeting emotion. However, in the realm of music theatre, magnified emotion is the crucial component of the entire presentation[84]. The contrasting view on the idea of composition between the Austrian Woman in *The Death of Klinghoffer* and the fundamental principle of opera could be read as the librettist's intention, not only to examine the artistic debate between the Apolline and the Dionysian doctrines but also to invite the audience to be immersed in a different concept of emotional composition and response.

Even though it is the anonymous characters who give variety and some dynamic to the opera, it could be argued that the named characters i.e. the hijackers and Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer, contribute the core dramatic actions of the whole piece. Unlike the choral meditations, the named characters' texts are mainly written in short syllabled words, which point directly to the core of the speaker's main argument. Furthermore, the lines for the named characters are constructed chiefly of verbs and nouns; descriptive adjectives tend to be omitted, in order to evoke more movement and make it easier for the audience to follow expositon and action. A vivid example of this can be found in act one scene one, when the hijacker, Molqi announces the reason for hijacking the cruise liner, "We are not criminals/ And we are not vandals/ But men of ideals."[85]

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[84] See Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (London: Cornell University Press, 1984) p. 108-126.

[85] The character has also ordered his compatriots, "No one will be hurt. / Check each passport; / A little discomfort/ For a short time. / Here is some/ American money. / It will cover any/ Damage to your/ Sporting rifles. We are/ Soldiers fighting a war." see Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p. 100.

In the Molqi's stanza, Goodman immediately subverts the public image of the Palestinian guerrilla fighters; instead of categorizing them as terrorists, the librettist depicts them as "men of ideals." They are depicted, in fact, as having no intention of hurting any passenger and their act is a protest against the world's hostile view towards their cause. The purpose of hijacking the *Achille Lauro* is not to cause human casualty but to make a statement for the future of Palestine. That things go wrong might have been thought by the librettist an illustration of the awkwardness of things but this was not a point of view shared by the opera's many critics.

In the final aria which is sung by Marilyn Klinghoffer, the librettist employs short phrasing to reveal Mrs. Klinghoffer's deep anger, desperation and sorrow at the loss of her beloved husband, Leon:

> Suffering is certain.
> The remembered man
> Rising from my heart
> Into the world to come,
> It is he whom
> The Lord will redeem
> When I am dead. [86]

Despite her initial disbelief in of the death of her husband and her hatred towards the hijackers, Marilyn Klinghoffer gradually unfolds her emotions and shifts the focus towards her hope of religious redemption. The passage expresses the character's first attempts at coming to terms with her personal trauma. Although her suffering will always accompany her, God's redemption after life has given her the strength to live. In her mind, only the ultimate human experience, death, can extinguish her personal suffering. However, as she finally realizes, even the death of her husband, cannot lead to final peace in this conflict, or even draw the world's attention sufficiently to deal with the Palestine question. In the large scale of things, Leon Klinghoffer's sacrifice could be considered an irrelevant detail in the general Israeli-Palestinian struggle, its only value as ammunition in further argument. The aria, however, represents an attempt to present what no one else will offer: a heart-felt mourning for a human victim.

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[86] Marilyn Klinghoffer continues, "I should have died. / If a hundred/ People were murdered/ And their blood/ Flowed/ in the wake/ Of this ship like/ Oil, only then/ Would the world intervene. / They should/ have killed me. / I wanted to die." Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p.162, 164.

These worries about the dramatic structure of Adams and Goodman's second collaboration prompt a further consideration of some trends to be found in operatic creation during the final decades of the twentieth-century. The consistently elevated diction and lyically expressive arias so typical of nineteenth century opera have seemed for some time to be no longer meeting composers' and librettists' needs. So here the narrative style in the libretto continues a the twentieth-century mannerism, in which by the careful mixing of colloquial and poetic language, the librettist attempts to find an effective narrative for the entire presentation. In *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Goodman assigns different levels of language to different situations while offering a quasi-recitative for most of the characters. The chorus sections in the opera are written with a highly elevated language which is supported with the most tuneful music in the entire piece – almost in the style of an oratorio. However, this narrative technique does not solve all the problems but it does provoke some ingenious solutions. In act two scene two the librettist uses plain colloquial language for Mrs. Klinghoffer in describing her worries about her hip joint; this is later echoed as she transforms the image of the pains of the body in a poetically elevated discourse on the pain or mourning in her final lament.

Because of the waning popularity of the operatic experience and the subsequent diminution of the opera audience, both composers and librettists have been forced to rethink and indeed to generate a fresh writing style, suitable for the twentieth-century music theatre.[87] One solution has been to take inspiration from the mythologising of contemporary events. Adams and Goodman's *The Death of Klinghoffer,* does indeed open new territory for operatic writing. By incorporating contemporaneous incidents, political debates, ethnic disputes and religious rivalry within a historical standpoint, Adams and Goodman's work has moved on from mere entertainment or expressionist introversion and colonise an area of intersection between the personal and the public.[88]

In this endeavour, the Old Testament provides Goodman not only with a treasure trove of references on the subject of the ancient struggle between the ancestors of the Israelis and the Palestinians but its mythic structure allow her to evoke a new aspect:

[87] See Donald Jay Grout & Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 770-774.
[88] See Rodney Milnes, "Angels, fools and 'Klinghoffer'", *Opera*, May 1991, p.494 – 497.

the politics of fanatical religious belief. In *Klinghoffer*, the chorus expresses themes which both explore and distance the possibilities of apocalyptic religious politics.

> Elijah will return, the Jews believe,
> the Antichrist condemn, the Messiah
> judge; the dead, the wicked and the good
> will be distinguished, the world consume
> and be renewed. Even the man
> who lies awake in dread will be distinguished.[89]

Both sides are capable of fanaticism in their religious belief that the only path to their goal of eternal salvation is through the political instantiation of strict observance of their religious teachings and the ruthless denial of all "otherness".[90] In this, they are seen to be willing to follow to the letter whatever had been recorded in their religious doctrines from the earliest days. This struggle over a "Holy Land" can be one of the prime examples and in this the opera has proved sadly prophetic.

It is for this reason that it has been argued that in *The Death of Klinghoffer*, the ostensible subject is actually relatively marginal to its concerns. The opera is, given the circumstances, a curiously undramatic piece, not just in the fact that the death itself occurs off-stage, but in that the dialogue and action are constantly being interrupted by choruses, general reflections and abstract considerations and recollections. It is as if the opera is really not much interested in the hijack itself. But the drive towards a larger mythologising context in the opera raises the question of whether the audience should see Leon Klinghoffer as a sacrificial victim or just an unlucky bystander. It is not clear that even Mrs. Klinghoffer wants to present him as such. Apart from a passing reference to "the touch of Palestine", she sees his death in almost totally personal terms. Further, just after he is killed Molqi announces: "American Kaput" – not, it should be noted "Jew". We know that (outside the opera) Leon Klinghoffer's murder will be presented as yet another example of Palestinian anti-semitism, but within the opera Goodman does not attempt to make such point. In her presentation of the material she is careful to establish different narrative points of view; these do not in themselves have much bearing on what did or did not happen, but they have an enormous impact on what we think the event means – for the meaning is given by this context.

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[89] Alice Goodman, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p. 118, 120
[90] See Cattan, *The Palestine Question*, p. 20-21.

What distinguishes sacrifice from, say, miscellaneous or routine killing? Clearly, if a child is run over in the street it is not a sacrifice in any sense (and despite the newspapers, it is scarcely a tragedy either – unless "tragedy" now means only that something is very sad.) The crucial feature of sacrifice is that it is embedded in myth and ritual. Typically, myth and ritual provide a narrative context into which the event is placed: even when (especially when) the narrative is opaque or almost unintelligible. The mythic envelope presents an interpretation and placing of the event and in this process it ceases to be raw event, no longer something very sad or odd, but something of importance. As a consequence, myth and ritual not only constitute the event as sacrifice, they also, in real sense, justify it and give it meaning.

Leon Klinghoffer cannot be regarded as a sacrifice by the other passengers or by the terrorists – to them he is part of the negotiations they are conducting with other countries. His characterization as an American makes him a likely victim, but the failure to speak of him as a Jew (denying him a special mythic context) suggests that sacrifice is not in their mind. We arrive at what seems an odd situation: that some particular victim can be a sacrifice from one point of view, but not from another. But this should not surprise: the supporting mythic framework is not universal and when we get a cacophony of voices (as in this opera) it becomes hard to settle on one as uniquely authenticated to such a degree that it shuts out the others. As to the events of the hijack itself, we should note that even events like this are ritualised – everybody must play their assigned role or else the thing turn into a bloody mess – which is something all are eager to avoid (including the hijacker themselves). This is rather different from the ritual of a suicide bombing where the point is indeed to turn everything in to bloody mess.

Throughout the entire opera, only the names of the hijackers and those of the Klinghoffers have been revealed; the rest of the characters, passengers and crew, like the Austrian Woman have been muted. In doing this the librettist has diluted the historical actuality of the incident and placed the opera in a symbolic, abstract time zone. This is not without good reason: the danger is that the work's potentially heavy political and realistic association with the never-ending Israeli-Palestinian situation would provide a distraction into partisan position-taking.[91] Which, of course, is

[91] To quote Steinberg's study, "there is no such 'reality' in *The Death of Klinghoffer*. The original production was placed in a versatile and evocative but quite abstract set by George Tsypin; Ramicova's clothes were likewise designed to distance and to neutralize (no Bermuda short, no marine whites).

exactly what happened despite the efforts of composer and librettist alike. Although the librettist is aiming to create a larger canvas in the hope of presenting a more rounded and abstract view of the Palestine question, outside readings of and attitudes towards the hijacking event ensured that it remained mired in irrelevant and pointless controversy.[92]

Singers double in divergent roles and many of the principal singers-actors have dancer-doubles in the manner of Anna I/ Anna II in the Brecht-Weill-Balanchine *Seven Deadly Sins*. Captain Gerardo de Rosa has lost his name and is simply the Captain… The words *Achille Lauro* occur just once." Michael Steinberg, "An Introduction of the opera" in the booklet of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, Elektra/ Nonesuch 7559-79281-2, p. 10-11.

[92] See Rodney Milnes, "Angels, fools and 'Klinghoffer'", *Opera*, May 1991, p.494 – 497.

5
A Marriage of True Minds

I. Unlearning the Lie

Auden's relationship with Chester Kallman was a key factor in his decision to turn to the libretto as a literary form in the 1950s.[1] According to Edward Mendelson's study, "opera gave Auden the solution to a problem of dramatic poetry that he had been unable to solve in his early poetic plays, the problem of the proper voice for a poet who wants to write a public and heroic art as well as a private and intimate one."[2] Moreover, Auden also viewed the world of music theatre to be one of the genres comprising what he perceived to be "secondary worlds", in which an artistic medium enables mankind to find self expression, in "extraordinary situations or states of violent emotion in which we feel an urgent need for utterance – we can not remain silent – and feel that words would be an inadequate medium for such utterance."[3] As a result, every operatic opus can be heard (and, for that matter, read) as a capsule of human high drama, in which the dramaturgic emotions lie beyond the capacity of verbal description. Hence, in order to fully express the dramatic situation in his later plays, Auden finally felt the necessity to form an alliance with a suitable composer to capture his ideal image of a secondary world.[4]

Deriving from Plato's "Parable of the Cave" and the concept of artistic imitation in Books VII and X of *Republic*[5], Auden's idea of "Secondary Worlds"

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[1] See Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1981) p. 261-263.
[2] W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Libretti and other Dramatic writings by W. H. Auden: 1939-1973*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 1993) p. xv.
[3] W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) p. 76
[4] See W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Book, 1968) p. 465-474.
[5] In Book VII of *Republic*, Plato reflects, "it's my opinion that the last thing to be seen – and it isn't easy to see either - in the realm of knowledge is goodness; and the sight of the character of goodness leads one to deduce that it is responsible for everything that is right and fine, whatever the circumstances, and that in the visible realm it is the progenitor of light and of the source of light, and in the intelligible realm it is the source and provider of truth and knowledge." Furthermore, in Book X of *Republic*, Plato notes, "it follows that representation and truth are a considerable distance apart, and a representer is capable of making every product there is only because his contact with things is slight and is restricted to how they look. Consider what a painter does, for instance: we're saying that he doesn't have a clue about shoemaking or joinery, but he'll still paint pictures of artisans working at these and all other areas of expertise, and if he's good a painting he might paint a joiner, have people look at it from far away, and deceive them- if they're children or stupid adults – by making it look as though the joiner were real…I think the important thing to bear in mind about cases like this, Glaucon,

further elaborates the basis for the motivation of human desire for artistic expressions.[6] Without the natural boundaries, which exist in the primary world, artists would be able to draw upon every element of life to create an artificial world, where creators are "omnipotent, with absolute freedom to say what they shall contain and what shall happen in them."[7] In the realm of the secondary worlds, music theatre can be considered as an unrivalled genre, in which the final offering of such a form should be a harmonious amalgamation of these Secondary Worlds.[8] Auden's following comment reveals his fascination in the artistic uniqueness of music theatre, i.e. opera:

> There are certain art forms, which, by their intrinsic nature, are defended against this kind of decadence [aesthetic enjoyment of horrors] and can therefore continue to exist only so long as people exist to whom the concepts of the sacred, the heroic, freedom, personal freedom and responsibility have real meaning. One of these is opera […].[9]

For the English poet, "the job of the librettist is to furnish the composer with a plot, characters and words: of these, the least important, so far as the audience is

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is that when people tell us they've met someone who's mastered every craft, and is the world's leading expert in absolutely every branch of human knowledge, we should reply that they're being rather silly. They seem to have met the kind of illusionist who's expert at representation and, thanks to their own inability to evaluate knowledge, ignorance, and representation, to have been so thoroughly taken in as to believe in his omniscience." See Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 243-244 and 348-349.

[6] Auden notes, "if our desire to create secondary worlds arises at least in part from our dissatisfaction with the primary world, the latter must be there before we can be dissatisfied with it." The definition of the primary world, as the poet notes, "when we say that the primary world is the objective world outside ourselves, we mean that it is a social and public world […] the primary world contains everything that has not been made by man, including himself, and also whatever of man's historical past is still on hand as reified in a humanly fabricated world of languages, mythologies, legends, creeds, tools, works of art etc. Though made by man, his past is no longer in his power to alter." W. H. Auden, *Secondary World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) p. 41-42.

[7] Human being's "principal grievances", according to Auden are, "1. We are born into it and by death disappear from it without our consent. But the secondary worlds we make, since they are embodied in verbal or visual or auditory objects, come into being because we choose to make them and are not subject to natural death. 2. Our freedom of action, whether as individuals or as societies is very limited. In the secondary worlds we make we are omnipotent, with absolute freedom to say what they shall contain and what shall happen in them. 3. Our knowledge and understanding are very limited. In a secondary world, we are omniscient, aware of everything which exists and happens in it and understanding exactly why. 4. Too many of our experiences are profane, unimportant, boring. Form a secondary world we can exclude everything expect what we find sacred, important, enchanting. 5. Evil and suffering are an insoluble problem. We can, if we wish, create Arcadian secondary worlds from which evil and suffering are excluded, but since, however unpleasant evil and suffering may be, nothing interests us more, most of the secondary worlds we created include them, but in a simplified more comprehensible form." Ibid, p. 43-44.

[8] Ibid, p. 75.

[9] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary World,* p. 75.

concerned, are the words. […] The verbal text of an opera is to be judged not by the literary quality or lack of it which it may have when read but by its success or failure in exciting the musical imagination of the composer."[10] However, Auden's attempt at an operatic creation in his first collaboration with Benjamin Britten, *Paul Bunyan* (1941), did not achieve critical acclaim at its premiere at New York City in May 1941.[11] The poet's endeavour to celebrate his new identity as an American is clearly visible throughout the whole piece; however the limitation of time for preparation, coupled with the amateur production, did seriously mar the final presentation of the ambitious piece.[12] Although Auden's *Paul Bunyan* was not considered to be a masterpiece, the work demonstrated the poet's virtuosity in libretto writing. Moreover, the piece arguably is the turning point for Auden as a librettist.[13] *Paul Bunyan* was written during the period immediately following Auden's arrival in the new continent; the work could also be regarded as an extension of Auden and Britten's original collaborations in the early 1930's.[14] It was also during this same period that the English poet gradually fell deeply in love with Chester Kallman, who was studying at Brooklyn College. Humphrey Carpenter's account reveals the poet's operatic initiation:

> In actual fact in the early months of their relationship it was Chester who moulded Auden rather than the other way round, at least in one important respect. He introduced Auden to opera. Auden had been brought up, despite his enthusiasm for music, to be totally ignorant of opera – 'to think' he put it, 'that opera was impossible'.[15]

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[10] Ibid, p. 78-79.

[11] See Donald Mitchell, "The Origins, Evolutions and Metamorphoses of Paul Bunyan, Auden's and Britten's 'American' Opera" in *Paul Bunyan* by W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) p. 88.

[12] Ibid, p. 88-91.

[13] See Alan Hollinghurst, "Forward" in *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: the Year 1936* by Donald Mitchell 2edn (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000) p. 1-3.

[14] According to Donald Mitchell, "Auden and Britten had been close collaborators in England in the thirties, above all in their work at the GPO Film Unit, the organization that first brought them together in 1935. But it was not only in documentary films like *Coal Face* and *Night Mail* that their extraordinary talents were combined. They also worked together in the theatre, in Rupert Doone's Group Theatre, where Britten wrote much incidental (and integral) music for Auden's and Isherwood's plays, *The Ascent of F6* and *On the Frontier*, and again in the then relatively new medium of radio: it was for the BBC that Auden and Britten wrote (in 1937) a pioneering and still remembered radio feature, *Hadrian's Wall*." Donald Mitchell, "The Origins, Evolution and Metamorphoses of *Paul Bunyan*, Auden's and Britten' 'American' Opera" in W. H. Auden's *Paul Bunyan: The Libretto of the operetta by Benjamin Britten*, p. 87.

[15] Carpenter's report continues, "This attitude was typical for his parents' generation in England, which believed, as he said, that 'the great Mozart operas might just do because Mozart was Mozart', but regarded Wagner and Verdi as vulgar and considered Rossini and Bellini and Donizetti to be 'simply beyond the pale'. Auden had scarcely encountered opera before he came to New York. Now Chester

As the attachment with Kallman grew stronger, the poet's perception of opera dramatically changed from indifference to enthusiasm. Although after *Paul Bunyan*, Auden was not to work again with Britten in the musical theatre, the English poet himself, with his abiding commitment to music, was to go on to write librettos (in collaboration with Chester Kallman) for Stravinsky, Henze and Nicholas Nabokov. Therefore, his first essay in this genre is of unique interest and importance.[16]

As great admirers of Hofmannsthal's work, Auden and his partner Chester Kallman were enthusiastically inspired by their Austrian predecessor's ideas in the formation of their libretti.[17] Auden and Kallman's first collaboration with Hans Werner Henze, *Elegy for Young Lovers*, is, in fact, a commemoration of the Austrian master in libretto writing.[18] Auden reveals, "our ambition in writing the libretto has been to see how much psychological drama and character interest we could make compatible with the conventions of the operatic medium, and the Greek Ancestors whose blessing we continually found ourselves invoking were Ibsen and Hofmannsthal."[19] Set in a mountain inn in the Austrian Alps, Auden and Kallman's libretto can be regarded as a psychological discourse on the internal battle between human morality and the creative urges within an artist.[20]

The central character of the piece is an ageing poet, Gregor Mittenhofer who is seeking inspiration to overcome his writer's block; finally the poet decides to take his inspiration from the young couple, Toni and Elizabeth However, in order to achieve emotional depth for his poetic creation, Mittenhofer deliberately sacrifices the two lovers in a snowstorm. Because the central figure of the opera is a poet, Auden and Kallman had set themselves the problem of conveying the importance of verbal content – but in an operatic context. Their solution was outlined by Auden: "in an opera, it seemed to us, it might be possible to portray a poet convincingly because poetry and music are different kinds of language. If, at certain moments, the poetry of our hero could be represented by music, the audience would […] be convinced that

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began to play him records of famous performances, and the two of them began to go regularly to the Metropolitan Opera House." Humphrey Carpenter, W. H. Auden: A Biography, p. 261.

[16] Ibid. p. 87-88

[17] See W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York: Vintage International, 1989) p. 345-350.

[18] To quote a phrase in the title of *Elegy for Young Lovers*, "to the memory of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Austrian, European and Master Librettist, this work is gratefully dedicated by its three makers." W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Libretti: And Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden, 1939-1973*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, p. 189.

[19] W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Libretti and other Dramatic writings by W. H. Auden: 1939-1973*, ed. by Edward Mendelson, p.247.

his poetry was good, although, as a matter of fact, the music was written not by him but by Henze."[21]

Auden and Kallman's libretto presents a portrait of the creative activity of Gregor Mittenhofer, whose sole purpose in life is to protect his artistic genius to the exclusion of all else. The librettists examine in particular the process by which Mittenhofer creates his forthcoming masterpiece, "Elegy for Young Lovers". However, in the opera, the poet's finished piece is not constituted by words but by musical notes, in the form of a vocal sextet. The six characters, who directly or indirectly contributed towards the formation of Mittenhofer's elegy, hum a harmonic vocalise as the poet apparently recites his work to an invisible audience. [22] Henze constructs the vocalise with six beats in a bar as if each bar could be read as a miniature of Mittenhofer's poem, which in fact has been forged from the lives of the six characters in the opera.

This is typical of the co-operative ingenuity that goes into the construction of the piece: the subject provides an opportunity for the librettists to create a work which would be able to encompass a range of speech registers, ranging from banal language about the weather to elevated poetic verse. Henze's score responds to Auden and Kallman's text with an elaborate use of recitative in which he distinguishes four levels of voice below that of full singing. The first level is speaking and it is typically associated with Josef Mauer, an Alpine guide whose only function in the opera is to bring information about conditions on the mountain but is otherwise not directly involved in the main action. The second level is the unpitched but metrically marked recitative and it is one of the patterns that Carolina and Dr Reischmann are mostly identified with.

DOCTOR

Let me feel

Your pulse. I thought so. Feverish. You ought to be in bed.[23]

Although the passage captures the interaction between Carolina and the doctor, the dramatic purpose of this level of diction is trivial. It resembles no more than the style of a petty everyday conversation. The next level up in terms of dramatic diction is the

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[20] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary World*, p. 89-96.
[21] See W. H. Auden, *Secondary World*, p.91
[22] The six main characters are Mittenhofer, Dr Reischmann, Toni, Elizabeth, Carolina von Kirchstetten and Hilda Mack. See W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Libretti and other Dramatic writings by W. H. Auden: 1939-1973*, p. 190.

recitative that is metrically marked with three generalised pitches but without any stave marking.

DOCTOR
You never give him cheques?
CAROLINA
No.
DOCTOR
How does he [Mittenhofer] know where to look?
CAROLINA
At first I always chose
A place that He was bound to find: behind his bedroom clock.
But presently I realized that what he most enjoys
Is playing hide-and-seek. So now I change it every day.
Great poets are like children.[24]

The passage clearly reveals that the main subject of the drama is more involved in this level of speech register. In this case, Carolina discloses the way she sponsors Mittenhofer. However, such speech register is still not dramatically significant enough to trigger the characters to express themselves in the format of aria. The fourth category is noted recitative on the full stave; it is signalled by an asterisk in the ascenders. Elizabeth's confrontation with Carolina in act two, scene two is a good example of such speech register.

ELIZABETH
You spoke of my place.
Aren't you, Gräfin, forgetting yours?
Or did you hire me? Is it your job
To procure for the Master? Excuse my asking?[25]

The dramatic tension in the passage is clear. Here, Elizabeth expresses her resentment at the expectations that accompany her position. Carolina is expecting her to stimulate (sexually) Mittenhofer's creativity and wants her to leave all self interest behind. However, Elizabeth's newly discovered love for Toni has deflected her attention from the poet and Carolina demands that she return to the service of the literary genius. The notated recitative highlights the drama and the tension between the characters. In addition to these notations there are also some vocal passages

[23] See *The Elegy for Young Lovers*, act I scene ii.
[24] See *Elegy for Young Lovers*, act I, scene ii.

which are marked *Recitativo*, even though there is no special symbol attached to them. Several passages in the score are also marked *Leggiero*, which approximate to the style of patter-song, and these add a mildly comic element to ease the often intense atmosphere.

These technical complexities are needed because *Elegy for Young Lovers*, is intended as an exploration of nineteenth-century discourse concerning the moral accountability of an artistic genius. To this end, the opera is tightly centred on the issue of Mittenhofer's literary talent and the subservient functions of the people who constitute his inner circle.

The scene of the presentation of the finished Elegy, mentioned above, will illustrate the point. In this moment, the librettists indicate the Romantic justification of Mittenhofer's act in sacrificing Toni and Elizabeth is the existence of his poem.[26] The background of the stage in which the poet gives his recital is "an ornamental backdrop for Mittenhofer's reading: Mount Parnassus, the muses crowning a poet, Apollo lyre and cherubim."[27] Mittenhofer believes that, to quote Auden's words, "aesthetically speaking, the personal existence of the artist is accidental; the essential thing is his production. The artist-genius, as the nineteenth century convinced him, made this aesthetic presupposition an ethical absolute, that is to say, he claimed to represent the highest, most authentic mode of human existence."[28] Therefore, according to the nineteenth-century aesthetic concept, Toni and Elizabeth are not merely being sacrificed to the pagan God of music and poetry Apollo and to Mittenhofer's vast egoism, but the young couple are actually being immortalised through his masterpiece, which serves as a testimony to human existence. However, though Romantic aestheticism might seem to justify the death of Tony and Elizabeth, the behaviour of Mittenhofer in fact underlines the librettists' detestation of such an inhuman idea. Artists are simply not qualified to be the high priests of modern society.

In the creation of Mittenhofer, the librettists explore as central themes the secularisation of myth and of the moral autonomy of aesthetics. The Romantic image that Auden is referring to is that of the absolute demands of art. With the collapse of

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[25] See Ibid. act II, scene ii.
[26] See Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, 4th edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) p. 658.
[27] See W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Libretti and other Dramatic writings by W. H. Auden: 1939-1973*, p.243

the religious element of myth and drama, the artist steps into the vacancy with the new role of legislator of mankind. He becomes a new-style messiah and he is uniquely fitted for this role because as an artist he sees further and deeper than the rest of humanity and is willing, almost required, to suffer for his art. He is not to as, say, a hopeless drunkard or faithless husband: no, he is plumbing the depths of experience on behalf of the rest of us in order to bring back to the surface the pearls of art. Thus, in *Elegy for Young Lovers* we have Mittenhofer as the high priest of his own art. He has his Vestal (Carolina), his sacred prostitute (Elizabeth), even his own Pythoness (Hilda) whose madness is a sacred mystery of poetic creation. There will also be a pair of sacrificial victims (Toni and Elizabeth). The poet goes into mountains to receive inspiration. He also accepts without question that his art/religion is to be given priority – even over the lives of others. A modernist twist to the Romantic myth is that this modern priest uses others to suffer for him rather than do it himself. As a priest of art he ensures that everything is tailored to his needs, even when those needs have no clear relevance to the practice of his poetry. The characterisation of Mittenhofer also represents an implicit claim that being a poet is so sacred a calling that it is a full-time business, that one never stops being a poet and that a poet is what one is, not something one does. But in the absence of authenticating claims of being truly divine his priestly sacrifice of the lovers is revealed as nothing but an exercise in malice and egotism; for besides being an important poet, Mittenhofer is a vile man and the audience has no obligation to accept his blurring of the roles in his own favour.

Elegy for Young Lovers is constructed as a tragicomedy. It is typical that the title derives from the tragic death of the young lovers, even though the nature of their love affair is a mixture of self-deception and fatuous rebellion. Apart from this tragic element in the plot, the surrounding material is largely salon comedy. The balance of tragic and comic element gradually shifts in the course of the opera towards tragedy and this is made particularly clear by an increase in ensemble in the second and third acts. These ensemble pieces present multiple points of view all at once and are notable for the level of self-deception or purely plain deception. Act two scene ten, "The Young Lovers", is a quintet in which each of the five characters express their own feelings about Toni and Elizabeth's affair. In the scene, while Toni blindly

[28] Ibid, p. 246-247

accepts Mittenhofer's approval of his union with Elizabeth, Elizabeth and Hilda on the other hand decide to ignore their instinctive sense of the bad omen of the seemingly blissful union. Mittenhofer's jubilation for Toni and Elizabeth's love is a deception anticipating his later decision to sacrifice the lovers to order to gain the inspiration for his elegy. After the ensemble, Carolina's comment marks one of the turning points of the opera.

> CAROLINA
> They forget the soil, who forget the hour.
> Where nothing can root, nothing will flower.[29]

The character's bitter remark reflects her sense of betrayal by Toni and Elizabeth. In her view, the young lovers simply are escaping from the responsibility in serving the genius in creating his art. For Carolina, the emergence of great art requires not only attentive care but also the constant (financial) nourishment of the artistic genius. Since Toni and Elizabeth have abandoned their mission, it is justifiable to sacrifice them for the sake of nourishing Mittenhofer's inspiration in the creation of his new piece. In Mittenhofer and Carolina's mind, even though the young lovers die of exposure, their youth and their love will be eternally preserved through the poet's "Elegy". The untimely death of the young lovers also reveals the destructive power of both nature and an artistic genius. Mittenhofer's childish behaviour is discreetly paralleled with Nature's unrelenting and indifferent characteristics. Henze's music reflects the solemnity of the piece and further presents the partnership between Mittenhofer and Carolina in the image of prophet and his priestess. The chimes of the clock which have marked the scenes throughout will eventually stop for the last act to suggest the alienation from and of Nature in the opera. This silence signals the librettists' denunciation of Mittenhofer's inhuman, excessive and decadent conduct and that he has finally received a direct response from Nature itself. The constant theme of snow falling and covering everything is not just a reference to the fate of Toni and Elizabeth, it forecasts the coming tragedy and the genesis of the Elegy itself. As snow gradually turns into the ice which eventually freezes the young lovers, Mittenhofer's poem has preserved them forever is his art.

As the centre of the opera, Mittenhofer's character is enigmatic. The audience initially has a glimpse of his monstrosity through his extraordinary childishness. The librettists then disclose another side of Mittenhofer's character through his bitter

resentment of three of the most established German poets of the twentieth-century, namely, Stefan George, Rainer Maria Rilke and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in act one scene five. His bickering is not just a childish jealousy for their success but an rankling anger about the class system in Viennese society. The three poets all possess either an aristocratic background or abundant financial backing from their wealthy families. Mittenhofer, on the other hand, is born of low social standing and desperately needs financial backing from his patron, Carolina. Reischmann comments on Mittenhofer's social status and financial insecurity in act one scene two.

> DOCTOR
>
> What would the Master be today? A simple postman still.

Mittenhofer's heavy dependence upon his patron and domestic staff has contributed to his personal anxiety and tantrums throughout the course of events. He is meant to be seen as being a very clever man and, indeed, a great poet, but as much of Mittenhofer's personal conduct is given to performance and manipulation, the question of sincerity and the truthfulness of his words scarcely arises. While he appears to say what he thinks, the audience is given little indication of his true intentions. This uncertainty is made worse by his total adherence to the myth that all he does will be justified by the art he produces and this egotism acts as a mask over his true feelings - even to himself. As a result, Mittenhofer feels he has almost an obligation to sacrifice anything and everybody around him and this he proceeds to do even to the extent of allowing Elizabeth and Tony to die both for the sake of a good title and out of vindictive spite.

> MITTENHOFER
>
> Elegy. Be. Fee. He. Me. Mimi.
>
> Young lovers.
>
> Plovers in dish covers.
>
> No. No. No.
>
> Prisoner's cell. Dingly Dell.
>
> Hell. Hell. Hell.
>
> Passing bell.
>
> Farewell. Farewell.[30]

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[29] See *Elegy for Young Lovers*, act II, scene x.
[30] See *Elegy for Young Lovers*, act III, scene i.

The passage is not only representative of the protagonist at work on his new project but the use of "Passing bell" also shows that he has already made up his mind to allow the lovers to die, even before they have left their alpine inn.

Mittenhofer is kept secure and well by his sponsor Carolina, his "secretary" Elizabeth and Doctor Reischmann, in order to preserve his creativity. But just being a considerable artist does not in itself provide Mittenhofer with any source of moral authority. When he argues Elizabeth:

> You, dear, I know,
> Read with perception
> But you cannot know,
> Have any conception
> Of what it is like
> To be a poet,
> Of what it means
> Never, never
> To feel, to think, to see, to hear,
> Without reflecting: "Now,
> Could I use that somehow?
> Would it translate
> Into number and rhyme?"[31]

Mittenhofer appears to plead for Elizabeth's understanding that she need not feel trapped by his genius while serving as his private secretary. The poet seems to detest this talent which stops him from having a moment of simple spontaneity, without the intrusion of the need to versify his surroundings. Moreover, Mittenhofer confesses to Elizabeth that his genius somehow has also impeded him from retaining any proper relationship. Even though the poet's personal divulgence might have an element of sincerity, he is actually using it as a means to manipulate Elizabeth into having sympathy for his personal selfishness. Mittenhofer's emotional arioso is written with short syllabic words and each line is neatly curtailed to a maximum of eight syllables. The verse is also composed with direct and dynamic poetic diction, in which the librettists have portrayed Mittenhofer's peculiar blend of manipulation and despair, by the use of short and brisk-sounding vowels such as, "to feel", "to think", "to see" and

[31] Mittenhofer continues, "Until in time/ One no longer knows/ what is true and false/ or right and wrong. / Now do you see/ Why I so often/ Fail other people, / Yes, even you? / But there I go/ Performing again. / Shall I never learn to stop it? / Elizabeth, my dear, / Forgive me!" Act II (The

"to hear". The passage also reveals the poet's purpose of existence, to reflect human senses and to translate them "into number and rhyme". The passage is in sharp contrast to the poet's soliloquy in the final scene of act two in which Mittenhofer's outburst is a real reflection of what he actually thinks about the people around him:

> A lunatic witch
> Who refuses to be mad; an aristocratic bore
> Who wants to play Nanny to her private Emperor;
> A doctor who needs a rhyming guinea-pig
> To make him famous, and make newly-rich
> His motherless whelp, that rutting little prig
> Who imagines it's rebellion to disobey
> His father once; *AND* a fatherless bitch
> Who found a papa-dog from whom to run away!
> Why don't they just blow up and disappear!
> Why don't they all *DIE*?[32]

This soliloquy is the closest he come to speaking at face value: Mittenhofer is alone and his egoism is allowed free rein. The poet clearly hates all those around him to the extent of wishing them dead. A momentary indulgence? Probably not.

As an aside it may be noted that, *Elegy for Young Lovers* can also be read as a tribute to Hofmannsthal's libretto for *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911). The relationship between the Feldmarschallin and her teenage lover, Octavian, is reflected in the connection between Mittenhofer and his personal assistant, Elizabeth Zimmer. In Hofmannsthal's work, as the Marschallin laments her passing youth in her aria, "Da geht er hin", the heroine hopes to be rejuvenated by having a passionate affair with a seventeen-year-old aristocrat. [33] Auden and Kallman's ageing poet also feels the need

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Emergence of the Bridge), scene v (Personal Questions).

[32] See Ibid. Act II (The Emergence of the Bridge), scene xiii (The End of the Day).

[33] In act I of *Der Rosenkavalier*, Marschallin reflects, "Da geht er hin, der aufgeblasene schlechte Kerl, / und kriegt das hübsche junge Ding/ und eine Pinkel Geld dazu, , als müßt's sein. / Und blidet sich noch ein, / das er es ist, der sich was vergibt. / Was erzüm' ich denn? / 's ist doch der lauf der Welt. / Kann mich auch an ein Mädel erinnern, / die frisch aus dem Kloster ist/ in den heiligen Eh'stand kommandiert word'n. / Wo ist sie jetzt? / Ja, such dir den Schnee/ vom vergangenen Jahr! Das sag' ich so: / Aber wie kann das wirklich sein, / das ich die kleine Resi war/ und daß ich auch einmal/ die alte Frau sein werd' / Die alte Frau, die alte Marschallin! / "Siegst es, da geht die alte Früstin Resi!" / Wie kann denn das geschehen? / Wie macht denn das der liebe Gott? / Wo ich doch immer die gleiche bin. / warum laßt er mich zuschau'n dabei/ mit gar so klarem Sinn? / Warum versteckter's nicht vor mir? / Das alles ist geheim, so vielgeheim. / Und man ist dazu da, daß man's ertragt. / Und in dem "Wie" , / da liegt der ganze Unterschied." English translation, "there he goes, the bloated worthless fellow, / and gets the pretty young thing/ and a tidy fortune, too, as if it had to be. / And flatters himself/ that it is he who makes the sacrifice. / But why do I upset myself? / It is just the way of the world. / I well remember a girl/ who came fresh from the convent/ to be forced into holy matrimony. / Where is she

to have an affair with Elizabeth, in order to retain his. To quote Auden's words, "the mating of minds is, surely, quite as fascinating a relationship as the mating of the sexes, yet how little attention novelists have paid to it. Most of us owe our intellectual initiation to an older person, as in *Der Rosenkavalier*, where Octavian owes his initiation into love to the Marschallin, and, like her, our master has to endure being left for minds of her own generation."[34] However, while the Marschallin eventually accepts the union between Octavian and Sophie with grace and dignity, Mittenhofer is incensed when he learns of the affair between Tony and Elizabeth and delights in their eventual destruction.

Henze, Auden and Kallman's collaboration is perhaps a reflection of that between Hugo Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss in the genre of music theatre. Throughout Richard Strauss's entire career, the composer was never ashamed of revealing and indeed even examining his own marriage in his compositions. The allure of exposing the marriage institution inspired many of the composer's celebrated works, such as, *Symphonia domestica* (1904) and a comic opera, *Intermezzo* (1924). The composer's working relationship with Hofmannsthal further resulted in more music dramas with the marital theme, for example, *Die Frau ohne Schatten,* (1919) *Die ägyptishe Helena* (1927) and *Arabella* (1933). Presumably, with his long association with Hofmannsthal on this very subject, Strauss had gradually formed a very precise literary taste, that domestic settings can serve as the background for metaphysical discussion in his libretti. In the composer's operatic swan song, *Capriccio* (1945), the Hofmannsthalian style is still detectable even in his absence. The libretto of the piece was written in collaboration with Clemens Krauss and the theme as presented is similar to that of *Arabella*, which proved to be the final collaboration between Strauss and Hofmannsthal, prior to the latter's death. It is a marital dilemma of choosing the appropriate suitor. However, unlike *Arabella*, which is superficially focused on the domestic issue surrounding the marital arrangement, *Capriccio* treats the subject as a metaphor by which the composer creates a

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now? / Yes, seek the snows/ of yesteryear! It is easily said: / but how can it really be, / that I was once the little Resi/ and that I will one day/ become the old woman… / the old woman, the Fieldmarshal's wife! / "Look you, there she goes, the old Princess Resi!" / How can it happen? / How does the dear Lord do it? / While I always remain the same. / And if He has to do it like this, / why does He let me watch it happen/ with such clear senses? / Why doesn't He hide it from me? / It is all a mystery, so deep a mystery, / and one is here to endure it. / And in the "how" / there lies the whole difference." by Walter Legge in the booklet of the recording of the piece, EMI 7243 5 56113 2 1, (1996). p. 119-121.

[34] W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*, p. 345.

musical/verbal debate in which the heroine faces the task of deciding which is the superior element in an operatic creation. In so doing, the composer had the chance to artistically review his lifelong working relationship with his librettists. In *Capriccio*, the marital relationship is no longer just simply applied to the union between the two sexes but expands the idea into the artistic union between words and music. This concealed rivalry, is revealed by Olivier, a poet and Flamand, a composer:

> OLIVIER
> Verliebte Feinde.
> FLAMAND
> Freundliche Gegner –
> OLIVIER
> Wort oder Ton?
> FLAMAND
> Sie wird es entscheiden!
> OLIVIER
> Ton und Wort…
> FLAMAND
> …sind Bruder und Schwester.
> OLIVIER
> Ein gewagter Vergleich![35]

Strauss set out the debate in his final opera, in which the aged composer whimsically did not actually provide an answer but concluded the piece with an open ending, as "the countess looks smiling into the mirror and then takes leave with a curtsy."[36] *Capriccio* reflects the collaborative relationship between librettists and composers, as Auden's notes, "as in a marriage, for a collaboration to endure and be successful, each partner must have something valuable to give and receive […] again like marriage, any artistic collaboration must have its ups downs: there are factions, some personal, some external which cause friction and even a threat of divorce."[37] Even though in *Capriccio* the composer refers to words and music as "brother and sister", in an operatic representation the relationship between words and music could also be

[35] *Capriccio*, Act I scene i. "Olivier: loving enemies… / Flamand: Friendly rivals… / Olivier: Words or music? / Flamand: She will decide it! / … Olivier: Music and word… / Flamand: …are brother and sister. / Olivier: A bold comparison." English translation by Walter Legge, CD booklet accompany R. Strauss, *Capriccio*. EMI5 673942, 2000.
[36] *Capriccio*, closing scene.
[37] W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*, p.347-348

described as man and wife, as they are no longer standing as individuals but as a conjoint whole.

The Straussian operatic style of mingling the domestic and philosophical issues has been revived in *Elegy for Young Lovers*. Furthermore, the librettists and the composer continuously develop Strauss' fascination in representing recitative. As noted above, throughout the opera, characters are usually associated with certain speech registers. Although some of Mauer's speech is accompanied by percussion, the character only delivers his lines by speaking. Mittenhofer's closest assistants, Corolina and Dr Reischmann frequently use the second and the fourth level of speech register. The young lovers, Toni and Elizabeth mostly sing, with only occasional and brief excursions into recitative. Hilda mostly sings but she also has a couple of significant incidents in which she suddenly drops into speech. The protagonist, Mittenhofer mostly sings but he also drops into the fourth recitative mode as the dramatic moment demands. It is clear in *Elegy for Young Lovers*, that the level of recitative is indicative of a particular discursive mode, from very plain to more "poetic" use of language. The opera is about a poetic genius and his struggle to create a masterpiece, therefore the librettists strongly associated Mittenhofer with elevated language and aria in order to have an accurate portrayal of the character. This high level of diction also links Toni and Elizabeth as not only, are they in love but they also represent the poet's essential inspiration. The supernatural element of the opera is carried by Hilda's irrational coloratura arias at the beginning. As the character is mourning for her dead fiancé and prophesying the ultimate death of the young lovers, the level of her poetic diction has to be higher than ordinary language. Compared with the previous four characters, Carolina and Dr Reischmann are featured with the lower speech register in the opera as they are not directly involved in the core action and merely appear as the helpers during Mittenhofer's creating process. The level of diction plays a crucial part in the dramatisation of the piece; it helps the composer to identify the meaning of the different phrases in order to bind them according to the dramatic situation. This matters because much of the vocal line is to rhymed, metrical and highly figurative language and some of the ensembles have very complicated rhyming-structures in which the words differ from one singer to another, but their rhymes accord. The librettists' careful differentiation of levels of verbal register is skilfully mirrored by the music. The "poetic" language also exists in several formats: obscurely figurative from Hilda; argumentative from Mittenhofer; lyrical and

metaphorical from Elizabeth. Instead of employing different musical styles to differentiate each of the poetic form, Henze marks them instrumentally. As a result, Reischmann is associated with the bassoon, Hilda with the violin and Mittenhofer is identified with brass.

In *Elegy for Young Lovers*, the composer and the librettists take the view that in order to successfully unite words and music in the twentieth-century fashion, it is essential to mark the level of speech register. The conventional dichotomy of aria and recitative as the fundamental structure for creating music theatre has already successfully been challenged by Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902). The absence of arias in Debussy's groundbreaking masterpiece particularly established it as a model for future composers. The expressive lyrical aria has in the main disappeared from modernist opera but librettist and composer still need to highlight dramatic passages, and mark exposition they require distinguishing speech registers. Mostly, when the composer wants to indicate or explore some significant emotion, he will do so via music. Samuel Barber for example does it with passages of swooning romanticism in *Vanessa*. Some composers, on the other hand, achieve this in entirely the opposite way. At the end of Britten's *Gloriana* Elizabeth speaks the entire closing sequence because the words must be heard and understood if her inner struggle and personal sacrifice are be fully grasped by the audience. Generally, the composer will not want his librettist to make exclusive use of banal language but neither will he often want ostentatiously "poetic" language interpolated into ordinary speech passages. To identify the different levels of recitative becomes a crucial process in the creation of an opera, as various styles may be used to signal various levels of interest or dramatic importance, and this has resulted in the growth of the arioso style of writing which marks an important development in twentieth-century opera.

Although *Elegy for Young Lovers* is a domestic drama, the opera also evokes serious concerns about the relationship between the artist's life and morality in relation to his art. One might argue that being unconfined by "conventional morality" is one thing if all that the unconventionality amounts to is excessive boozing, drugging or a relaxed attitude towards sexual behaviour. However, as the opera was composed and performed not long after the end of WW II in which Jews were systematically murdered by the Nazi government, the question of an artist's moral responsibility immediately emerges. *Elegy for Young Lovers* therefore depicts the

librettists' concerns about an artist's duty – especially while working in an extreme political environment such as the Third Reich. How many composers collaborated for the sake of their art? Mittenhofer simply allows two people to die for his the sake of a good title. In the face of recent horror the self-indulgence of Romantic myth appears untenable. Through Tony and Elizabeth's final duet, Auden and Kallman offer a contrasting viewpoint to the myth of Artistic Genius:

> Not for love were we led here.
> But to unlearn our own lies,
> Each through each, in our last hour,
> And come to death with clean hearts.
>
> What Grace gave, we gladly take,
> Thankful although even this
> Bond will break in a brief while,
> And our souls fare forth alone.
>
> God of Truth, forgive our sins,
> All offences we fools made
> Against thee. Grant us Thy peace.
> Light with Thy Love our lives' end.[38]

These are the final moments of Toni and Elizabeth. The three stanza passage provides the young couple with a united voice in which they recognise their inevitable destiny, as they bid farewell to the world. Although their deaths are not the consequence of their own actions, both Toni and Elizabeth have come to the conclusion that the journey of their lives is about forgiveness. The librettists underline two conflicting value systems, egotism/selfishness and Christianity. The young couple are the victims of Mittenhofer's monstrous egotism but it is through God's grace that they might achieve final salvation. In order to "come to death with clean hearts" they not only have to purge their own sins but also, are required to ignore the vicious deeds of others. Even though Toni and Elizabeth would be immortalised through Mittenhofer's poem, the arts can not justify the loss of two innocent lives. By imploring the "God of Truth" to grant the young couple redemption, the last two stanzas are the librettists' method of resolving the

[38] *Elegy for Young Lovers*, Act III (Man and Wife), scene viii (Toni and Elizabeth).

unsympathetic myth of Artistic Genius and providing another, preferable route humanity: the religion of art is not to be confused with Religion. Toni and Elizabeth initially express their gratitude to the Divine Grace, which had granted them beauty, charm and happiness throughout their lives. Thereafter, the dying couple implore their maker to grant them forgiveness and the purification of their souls before they die. And the opera returns to Mittenhofer's Elegy.

II. The Light for an Outsider

KUNDRY
Den ich ersehnt in Todesschmachten,
den ich erkannt, den blöd Verlachten,
laß mich an seinem Busen weinen,
nur eine Stunde mich dir vereinen,
und, ob mich Gott und Welt verstößt,
in dir entstündigt sein und erlöst!
PARSIFAL
Auf Ewigkeit
wärst du verdammt mit mir
für eine Stunde
Vergessens meiner Sendung
in deines Arms Umfangen!
Auch dir bin ich zum Heil gesandt,
Bleibst du dem Sehnen abgewandt.[39]

In Richard Wagner's final music drama, *Parsifal* (1882), a *Bühnenweihfestspiel*[40], which commemorates Good Friday, the composer/librettist

[39] Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act II, English translation, "Kundry. One I desire with deathly yearning, / one whom I knew, though I despised Him: / let me upon His breast lie weeping, / for one brief hour with you united, / and then though God and world might scorn, / I'd be redeemed by you and reborn! Parsifal. For evermore/ you'd be condemned with me, / for that brief hour, / forgetful of my calling, / within your arms enfolded! / For your salvation I was sent, / if of your yearnings you repent." by Andrew Porter in *Opera Guide: Parsifal*, ed. Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1986) p. 114-115.
[40] To quote Mike Ashman's study, "he [Wagner] titled the work *Bühnenweifestspiel* – which means not so much 'sacred festival drama' (a standard English rendering) but rather 'festival work to consecrate a

creates two symbolic characters Parsifal and Kundry, in order to underline his intention of depicting both the sacred and the profane, in this presentation on the subject of the secularisation of Christianity. Wagner's final opus reflects the composer's aesthetic appropriation of religion. The composer notes, "it could be said that at the point where religion becomes artificial, it is left to art to salvage the kernel of religion by recognising the figurative value of the mythical symbols that religion would have us believe in their literal sense and, through their ideal presentation, revealing the deeper truth that lies hidden within them."[41] Through the creation of *Parsifal*, Wagner intends to authenticate the Romantic concept of artistic genius and even promotes the notion of the artist as a Christ figure possessing the power of redemption for humanity.

First performed on 27 December 1954, Gian-Carlo Menotti's music drama, *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, like its German predecessor, is also constructed around two conflicting characters, Annina and her brother, Michele.[42] Like *Parsifal*, *The Saint* also uses Christianity as a dramatic backdrop to express the composer's view on religion. But unlike Wagner, the opera reflects the inner religious conflicts which troubled Menotti throughout his life. Even though the composer had broken away from the doctrines and dictates of Catholicism when he was sixteen, the religious problems still continuously haunted. The opera is set in a deprived Italian district of Manhattan and its style bears a strong narrative resemblance to *verismo* operas. [43] Although Annina and Michele are strongly attached siblings, their attitudes to the profoundly traditional Catholicism of their upbringing cannot be more different. The heroine, Annina, embodies the element of sincere and pure religious faith in the piece. Michele, on the other hand represents the figure of the apostate and rebellious spirit. Annina's determination to take the veil as a bride of Christ is the focal point of the final scene of the work, when the physically fragile but mentally steadfast heroine,

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stage'. The 'stage' was, of course, Bayreuth and the 'consecration' was for Wagner's heirs. Mike Ashman, "A Very Human Epic" *Opera Guide: Parsifal*, ed. Nicholas John, p.7.

[41] See Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art*, tran. William Ashton Ellis (Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1994) p.

[42] See John Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985) p. 71-73.

[43] According to *The New Grove Book of Operas*, "*Verismo* (It.) 'realism': name for the Italian version of the later 19th-century movement towards naturalism in the European literature, of which Emile Zola in France was the dominate figure." Stanley Sadie ed. *The New Grove Book of Operas* (London: Macmillan, 1996) p. 698.

pleads for the prolongation of her life in order to accomplish her ultimate wish to be united with Christ.[44]

> Oh, my love, at last the hour has come.
> Help me now to bear so great joy.
> Hold back, O death, for still a little while,
> then kindly come, and make the night eternal(,)
> for His eternal love […]
> Sustain me, O God.[45]

The repetition of "O" not only emphasises the poor girl's apparent joy but also amplifies her desperate plea for God's assistance in sustaining her during her acceptance as a nun. At the end of the passage, Annina once again collapses onto her chair with a cry for divine support to sustain her failing health. The passage also links her piety and commitment to the communal importance of Catholicism to the residents of Bleecker Street. Because all of them are Italian immigrants, Catholicism becomes a major binding force for the community and the libretto is structured about crucial rituals: marriage, death, taking the veil, cultic behaviour and social exclusion. It is an atmosphere in which rituals, religion and social practice are dangerously blended and confused by the characters. Displaced persons cling to a cultic past because it gives some support to their identities in a foreign land. Michele, in denying his religion, is partly negating himself and his community and the result is a disconnected isolated and self-absorbed personality who cannot risk taking other peoples' wishes or hopes into consideration.

Michele, represents a completely oppositional perspective towards religion. In addition, he totally rejects the notion that his sister is some kind of saint - a belief that has taken root among his neighbours, who have witnessed Annina's blurred religious visions which coincided with the appearance of the stigmata on her hands and during which phenomena several unexplainable medical recoveries have occurred in those around her.[46] For Michele, his sister is merely a sick girl who needs help in order to regain her physical (and mental) health. Furthermore, the hero's violent rejection of Catholicism, coupled with his ardent secularism, have made him an object of local suspicion. During a conversation with Annina, the hero expresses his aspiration to escape from the inquisitive neighbours.

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[44] See John Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1985) p. 72
[45] *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, Act III scene ii.

Sister, I shall hide you and take you away,
far from these people, far from this street.
Here the blood is darkened by mem'ries and fears,
medalled with idols, daggered by tears.
Here the young are branded by a relentless past,
receive its secret signal, and bear the enslaving mark.[47]

The librettist not only depicts Michele's strong desire to leave the community but also indicates his intention to drag his sister along with him. In Michele's opinion, the future of their community is bleak. People's fanatical religious beliefs lead them into being "medalled with idols" and the local youths are trapped by the "relentless past" of their Italian background. The hero has come to believe that the residents of the street are powerless to escape the enslavement of their indoctrinated religious beliefs, which they have inherited from their immigrant ancestors. Unless the residents are courageous enough to move "far away from the street", their lives will "darken by mem'ries and fears." Moreover, the wording of Michele's passage promptly invites the reader to think of the opera in the terms of late nineteenth-century Italian music theatre. By using words such as "blood", "memories", "fears" and "tears", the librettist/composer although working in English, presents a passionate verbal image instantly recognisable from the works of Verdi, Puccini and Menotti's own teacher, Umberto Giordano.

The Saint of Bleecker Street is stylistically a work in the tradition of realism (and hence of operatic *verismo*) It is a presupposition of this mode that the action is supposed to be transparent: the people may harbour hidden or confused motives, but the plot does not feature any intrusive ontological mysteries; the gods do not intervene with troubling, inexplicable or unsatisfiable demands. Metaphysically, all is out in the open. This makes mythic narrative difficult and narrows the range of its possible functions especially with regard to the role of the central actor. One unfortunate side-effect is that, in full heroic mode, the Hero can lose his sacrificial or symbolic function and come to seem merely a self-centred bully. So it happens here that Michele's big heroic act is the killing of a defenceless woman because she said something that displeased him. Menotti does darken and enrich the mixture with the addition of a demanding, mysterious and uncontrollable religion, full of strange

[46] *The Saint of Bleecker Street,* Act I scene ii, duet between Annina and Michele.
[47] *The Saint of Bleecker Street,* Act I scene ii, duet between Annina and Michele.

healings, manifestations and hysterias. These myths are not dead, but have been translated into the stresses of a displaced and uncertain community. The composer himself may not believe in the literal truth of these manifestations, but that is somewhat beside the point.

The musical style in the opera also demonstrates some degree of uncertainty. While there are certainly passages or real power in the music, *verismo* narrative should have the *verismo* musical treatment; but here there are sections more reminiscent of Broadway and Hollywood Musical styles: the setting of crowd scenes, for example, could be straight out of 1940-50's Hollywood. Furthermore, even though Michele is supposed to be the representative of the integrationist thinking among the immigrants, he is given no music to indicate this role, and there are no "American" inflections to be heard; nor, indeed, any genuinely twentieth-century ones. Instead, the action is punctuated by big-scale arias and the late-Romantic ethos within which Puccini's music was so effective seems distinctly out of place in mid-century New York. Similar remarks can also be made about style the libretto in that while there are gestures towards the contemporary, concrete details are somewhat ambiguous and swallowed up in a kind of generalised "scene-setting". The *verismo* quality of the opera suggests that the piece would most likely be set during the early twentieth-century but the lack of specific information from the composer also suggests that he would like to push the narrative towards a more opaque and mythic manner, as he did in *The Consul*.

This use in *The Saint* of the standard Italian dramatic themes and literary symbols of verismo resembles a continuation of Francesco Maria Piave's libretto for Giuseppe Verdi's opera, *La Forza del Destino* (1862). Like Menotti's hero, the protagonist of Piave's work, Don Alvaro, is the prototype of the Italian operatic hero,[48] who is everlastingly haunted by his ambiguous identity and strong sense of social expectation. The operatic characteristic is reflected in an aria in the third act of *La Forza del Destino,* in which Don Alvaro expresses his unfortunate past:

> La vita è inferno all'infelice.
> Invano morte desìo! Siviglia! Leonora!
> Oh, rimembranza! Oh, notte
> ch'ogni ben mi rapisti!

[48] See John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 176-177.

Sarò infelice eternamente, è scritto.[49]

As the title of Verdi and Piave's collaboration indicates, "destiny" not only thematically but also dramatically binds the Italian opera into a complete entity.[50] Despite his noble family background in Central America, Don Alvaro is still a social outcast in the predominately conservative society, which was to be found in the Spanish mainland in the mid eighteenth-century. Like his twentieth century counterpart, Don Alvaro is also haunted by the past and his troubled identity.[51] The everlasting sorrow and seemingly doomed fate of the character, is also reflected in Piave's utilisation of words such as, "inferno", "morte/death", "infelice/unhappiness" and "rimembraza/remembrance". Both Don Alvaro and Michele's immigrant upbringing have seriously impeded their formation of self-identity, which results in these two characters being at the edge of society and "bear the enslaving mark."

The portrayal of Michele presents a considerable problem for the opera. The composer clearly wants him to have some complexity and to symbolise the tensions facing the immigrant who wants to move, at least mentally, beyond the ghetto, but in fact he comes across as childish, self-centred and obnoxious. While the character says that everyone hates him because he is a rebel, in actual fact people are more likely to dislike him because he is a priggish nuisance. The result is that Michele is portrayed in a way that makes it is very difficult to obtain the audience's sympathy – when Salvatore threatens to kill him if he touches Annina one can almost see the audience nodding in agreement. The characterisation of Michele will get more worrying when Desideria's accusation of incestuous love seems altogether too close to the mark – it is difficult to see what else might be the cause of such extreme reaction. Throughout, Michele objects with excessive violence to his sister taking the veil: disagreement is rationally possible but in the end it is not his life, and he behaves

[49] Act III, *La Forza del Destino* words by Francesco Maria Piave, English translation, "For one like me, all life is torment. But vainly / Death I have courted! Seville, Leonora! / Cruel remembrance! Oh night/ That robbed my life of its every joy! / And fate decrees that I must suffer for ever." by Andrew Porter, *Opera Guide: The Force of Destiny*, ed. Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1983) p. 82.

[50] See Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971) p. 237-245.

[51] In the third act of *La Forza*, the exiling hero further reveals his past, "Della natal sua terra il padre volle/ spezzar l'estranio giogo, e coll'unirsi/ all'ultima degl'Incas la corona/ cingere confidò. Fu vana impresa! / In un carcere nacqui; m'educava/ il deserto; sol vivo perché ignota/ è mia regale stripe! I miei parenti/ sognarono un torno e li destò la scure! / Oh, quando fine avran le mie sventure!" English translation, "My father tried to free his native country/ From Spaniard persecution, and so he wed/ The last of all the Incas, and he hoped to/ Gain the Peruvian crown. A vain endeavour! / I was born in a prison; spent my youth/ In the desert; I live because no Spaniard/ Knows my royal lineage! … My noble parents, / Who dreamed of a kingdom, died on a Spanish scaffold! … / Oh God, is there no end

as if it were. Furthermore in the opera the Italian community is inclined to act like a group of superstitious peasants but that does not mean that the character has to make a crazed spectacle of himself at a wedding and then go on to kill his lover in the course of his passionate outburst. The excess of response in the portrayal of Michele lacks a proper motivation, so there is no sense of proportion in him. Annina has some sense of other people, but there is also a problem in her presentation: as on the one hand she is supposed to be simple to the point of retardation but on the other we see her being acute about people, far more so than her brother.

Michele's immigrant personality is partly derived from Menotti's own inner struggles.[52] To quote John Ardoin's observation, "the grave humanity and dramatic dimension of *The Saint* grew entirely from within Menotti. […] In *The Saint*, he confronts two strong strains within his own being that run at times independent of each other yet have intertwined at other times. The first is his Italian heritage… principally through the figure of Michele. The other and dominant strain is the religious one, the wrestling within him of angel and devil, believer and doubter."[53] As opposed to the character of the rebellious hero, Michele, Annina, the opera's heroine, can be considered as representing the librettist's inner desire to retrieve some of his own bewildered religious faith.[54] After Menotti's arrival in America in 1927, the composer had gradually lost his bond with Roman Catholicism, which had defined his entire childhood and adolescence years in Italy.[55] However, the nostalgia, the sensational success at the beginning of his career and, arguably, his sexuality, had left Menotti with a sense of spiritual vacuum, which continued to haunt him. As a result, according to Ardoin's study, Menotti's confronting of his inner self is dramatised in the characterisation of the two siblings of Michele, the doubter and Annina, the believer.

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to all my suffering?" by Andrew Porter, *Opera Guide: The Force of Destiny*, ed. Nicholas John, p. 82.

[52] See John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1978) p. 119-123.

[53] See John Ardoin, *The stages of Menotti*, p. 71-72.

[54] Ibid, p. 119-120.

[55] According to Joel Honig, "having broken away from the Catholic Church at the age of sixteen, following his arrival in Philadelphia, Menotti was haunted by spiritual problems. His boyhood faith, instilled and nourished by a parish priest in the hills of Lombardy, had been disturbed in Milan while he was a teenage student at that cosmopolitan centre's conservatory, and its transplantation to the soil of secular American life had further deracinated it. As Menotti's intellect flowered, spiralling doubts began to strangle his faith, and professional success served only to rouse deep-seated feelings of sin and guilt that had been languishing since childhood." Joel Honig, "Menotti: *The Saint of Bleecker Street*" article accompany the complete recording of the opera, Chandos, CHAN 9971(2), 2002. p. 13.

Annina's strong faith in her religion and her stigmatic condition make the residents of Bleecker Street believe that she possesses healing powers. Annina's state of sainthood is, however, only believed by the ordinary local residents. Throughout the libretto Menotti does not directly suggest that the heroine is really a living saint. Carmela, the priest and Annina herself never discuss these rumours. Menotti remarks, "it is undeniable that the intense and incandescent faith which nourished my childhood and my adolescence has seared my soul forever. I've lost my faith, but it is a loss that has left me uneasy. I often feel like a runaway, who suddenly finds himself wondering if he has not left home too rashly or too soon. A certain nostalgia for my years of grace is, I believe, the knowledge that faith cannot be attained, but can only be given by God as an act of grace."[56] As a result, the heroine's aspiration to convert her brother back to the catholic faith, arguably reflects something of the librettist/composer's desire to regain his lost religious tranquillity, which had stemmed from his experience of Catholicism, gained during his formative childhood years in Italy.

> ANNINA
> Brother I shall lead you and show you the way.
> Far from all fears, and far from this world.
> In the city of God, love is constant and deep,
> Joy without wine, and peace without sleep.[57]

The spiritual confrontation between the two siblings to be found in Menottis's prose-like stanza, could also be analysed into two contrasting assertions. The librettist opens the passage with the heroine's grim and fearsome perception of the world and her eagerness to liberate Michele from the earthly ghetto through religious salvation. The following two lines further elaborate Annina's visions of her ultimate destination in life, namely "the city of God" in which the serene atmosphere would provide everyone with boundless "love", "joy" and "peace"

Although Menotti's music theatre pieces tend to sacrifice the role of verbal text for the overall musical structure, for the composer, the words and music in an operatic representation are already forged into a new entity. Like both the hero and heroine of *The Saint of Bleecker Street,* in which the two siblings are inseparable, words and music are in fact designed to be artistic twins. The job of a composer and a

[56] See John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography*, p. 122.
[57] *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, Act I scene ii.

librettist, for Menotti, is to resolve the artistic challenge of *parlar cantando*[58] in music theatre, in order to enable actors and actresses to "tell and act a story in musical terms."[59] Moreover, as the sole author of every one of his operas, Menotti's working experience also sheds some light on the intriguing procedure of the composition of an opera. To quote the composer's words, "I conceive my libretto as a very loosely constructed sketch that I eventually mold into a definite shape through the impetus of musical logic. I always sing my words as I write them even if they seldom retain this first spontaneous musical physiognomy. This helps me give to my senses a dramatic rhythm which is musical rather than literary. I am not particularly proud of the literary quality of my librettos, which I consider a passive element of my musical structure. I can write much better than that and as a writer I would rather be judged by my plays or short stories."[60]

Menotti's idea of words as subordinate to the formation of music in an operatic composition also echoes the sacrificial element in the plot of *The Saint of Bleecker Street*. The story of the opera is constructed, according to Gruen's study, "against the colourful but sinisterly superstitious setting of Little Italy, the plot deals with the conflict between saintly Annina (mysticism), her unbelieving brother (cynical realism), and his mistress Desideria (earthly love). In the effort to convert each other, they succeed only in destroying one another, for their unshakeable beliefs lead them along opposite paths to seemingly unavoidable destinations."[61] Annina is eager to guide her brother towards recognising and indeed accepting the spiritual and religious faith she believes is latent within him, while Desideria is urging the hero to

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[58] *Parlar cantando* is an Italian term for singable speech. The term can also be traced back to 17th century Florentine Camerata's idea of the style of music theatre, *recitativo* – "a single vocal line, sung in free declamatory style, with simple instrumental support. This, solely concerned to reflect the meaning of the words and the inner life of the drama, did not impede the poet's thought as did the contrapuntal madrigal style. It was even argued that it was superior to spoken verse, since the musical inflections intensified the implied emotions." Quotation from Leslie Orrey, *Opera: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999) p. 17.

[59] Menotti reflects, "I think that I have contributed to opera a very personal kind of recitative, beginning with *The Medium*, which I consider the fundamental work upon which I base all my other operas. The problem of the parlar cantando has always fascinated me. I felt somehow that no composer had yet solved the problem of making people tell and act a story in musical term." An interview by John Gruen. See John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1978) p. 220; Ardoin also notes, "in the case of Menotti, this [operatic] tradition is reflected in the overriding prominence he gives the human voice. For it, he has shaped melodies that not only sing themselves with utter naturalness and explore the continuing challenge of parlar cantando that has faced composers form Claudio Monteverdi forward, but that encapsulate an emotion and vividly create character through music. Anything serves him – melodrama, polyphony, dissonance, popular strains – to conjure a mood or breathe life into a figure." John Ardoin, *The stages of Menotti*, p.10.

[60] See John Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti*, p. 103.

embrace his human passion and desires.[62] The consequences of the entangled emotional involvements between these three characters have, in the end, a destructive effect. Michele's public refusal to acknowledge his affection for Desideria, eventually leads to the character's final confrontation with not only her lover but also the entire community.

> DESIDERIA
> Annina, Annina, always Annina!
> I knew it, I knew it!
> What does she ever do for you,
> except light candles for your soul?
> But you are bewitched by her.
> You're ruining your life because of her.
> Why don't you leave her alone?
> She doesn't love you the way you think.
> She pities you,
> and you'll never change her.[63]

The passage further explores the social discrimination which unjustly fall upon Desideria. Her affair with Michele has resulted in her exclusion from the community and difficulties with the Church. Even though Michele has deliberately cast himself out of the community, he is still invited to the wedding. On the contrary, Desideria is completely shunned. The confusion of social practice with the dogmas and mysteries of religion results in cruelly different social expectations between man and woman. Desideria's passage expresses her yearning to be included in the community and her strong desire to have a normal domestic life with her lover. As it turns out, Michele simply does not care about her complaints nor her unjustified social exclusion. Furthermore, Desideria also emphasises the impossibility of Michele's persuading his sister to be content with her secular life and abandon her intention to take the veil. From Desideria's point of view, Annina's love for her brother is derived mainly from sympathy and her strong religious belief. Social and religious pressures have forced Michele to view his love for his mistress with something of the same contempt as the community. The hero's inability to reconcile these conflicts has gradually resulted in

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[61] See John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography*, p. 122-123.
[62] According to the text of *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, Act II.
[63] Act II, *The Saint of Bleecker Street.*

enormous stress.[64] At the wedding reception, Michele's resentment of his situation and his feeling of being trapped within the community finally results in a fatal physical attack on Desideria. Thus the disastrous emotional clash between these two characters has resulted in a pointless murder. Finally in response to Desideria's accusation, Michele simply kills her as a form of answer, suggesting his attachment to his sister is obsessive confused and even worrying.

Annina's determination is strongly felt throughout the opus. The heroine's single-minded devotion to her religion is also clearly visible at her entrance in the opera. Despite her poor health, her blurred vision of the Passion vividly highlights the heroine's firm religious belief. Even though the family tie between her and Michele has held these two siblings together, for the heroine, her desire to serve her church surpasses her love for her brother. She believes, that only through her dedication to the divine power, would Michele have a chance to gain his final salvation. In the end, she finally sacrifices her love for her brother in order to achieve what she perceives to be her destiny - which is to become a nun before she dies.

III. A Merry Garden?

Or bene, udite,
Ma senza andar in collera:
Qual prova avete voi, che ognor costanti
Vi sien le vostre amanti?
Chi vi fé sicurtà che invariabili sono i lor cori?[65]

The question, which Don Alfonso poses at the beginning of da Ponte and Mozart's final collaboration, *Così fan tutte* (1790), sets out to challenge the

[64] Desideria is viewed by the Catholic Church as living in sin. In the second act of the opera she reveals, "They call me a slut because I sleep with you. / I can no more be asked to christ'ning and weddings. / But that doesn't stop you going to them."

[65] Act I of *Così Fan Tutte* by Lorenzo da Ponte and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, English translation "Well then, listen, / but without flying into rage: / what proof have you/ that your loves are always true to you? / What makes you so sure/ that their hearts are steadfast?" by Lionel Salter in the booklet of Deutsche Grammophon recording of the opera, 429 874-2.

fundamental component to be found in every human relationship, namely the fidelity of the participants.[66] The subtitle of da Ponte's *drama giocoso*, "The School for Lovers", further underlines the librettist's intention to examine critically the realities of love through the portrayal of the two ostensibly committed couples.[67] *Così fan tutte* should not simply be read as a cynically chauvinistic work in which feminine fidelity is tarnished for the sake of a gentlemen's attention. In fact, it is through the librettist's ingenious craftsmanship of the libretto format, in which the text explores the major characters' psychological and philosophical perspectives, that the audience is able to come to a more nuanced appreciation the basic fabric of relationships. To quote John Stone's study, "it is not merely the background of the eighteenth-century theatre: of the forms of Italian comic opera built from arias, recitatives, ensembles and extended finales; of the *commedia dell'arte* servant girl who deceives all those about her by assuming a series of disguises; or of Marivaux's theatre of experiment, in which the laws of human behaviour are established under scientific conditions. These are all things which are integral to the opera, but it has yet another ancestry. *Così fan tutte* brings together some of the central strands in European poetry."[68] For a modern reader, da Ponte's libretto can also be read as an allegory for the concept of the marital institution, in which the bond should not only be a piece of legal commitment but also a firm collaboration deriving from mutual admiration and respect.[69]

As with *Così fan tutte,* Michael Tippett's *The Knot Garden* intends to explore the intricacy of interpersonal relationship but sets the plot in a twentieth-century context. The opera received its premiere at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden on December 2, 1970, almost two hundred years after da Ponte and Mozart's final collaboration. Like its predecessor, Tippett's third opera concentrates upon a series of discussions on the psychological interactions between the characters.[70] However, while da Ponte's work focuses on the two couples' response towards Don Alfonso's proposed hypothesis, Tippett's libretto clearly hoped to encompass a wider examination of the realm of interpersonal relationships. *The Knot Garden,* is

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[66] See April Fitzlyon, *The Libertine Librettist: A Biography of Mozart's Librettist , Lorenzo da Ponte* (London: John Calder, 1955) p. 160-161.
[67] Ibid, p. 154-157.
[68] See John Stone, "The Background to the Libretto" in *Opera Guide: Così Fan Tutte* ed. by Nicholas John (London: John Calder Ltd, 1983) p. 35.
[69] See Brain Trowell, "Mozart at the time of 'Così fan tutte'" in *Opera Guide: Così Fan Tutte* ed. by Nicholas John, p. 7-15.
[70] See Paul Driver, "The Knot Garden" in *Michael Tippett: A Celebration*, ed. by Geraint Lewis (Southborough, The Baton Press, 1985) p. 160.

structured around the main characters Faber and Thea, a married couple at the brink of marital breakdown.[71] Around these characters, the story line is spread out to include relatives friends and passing acquaintances. These include: their adolescent ward Flora who has begun experiencing emotional and sexual maturity;[72] Denise, "the turbulent girl grown to a woman" (as described by her sister Thea), who is a tortured freedom campaigner; and finally Mel and Dov, who are a same sex couple facing the terminal stage of their relationship.[73] Like Don Alfonso in da Ponte's *Così*, Tippett also includes a voyeuristic character, Mangus to assess and to analyse the psychological interactions between the six individuals in the opera. Eric Walter White recalls the genesis of Tippett's third opera, "his starting point was his wish to present a number of different contemporary characters, all of whom were to be of more or less equal operatic importance. There would be no leading man or women, and no chorus. The action would explore the characters' relationships with each other, particularly as set off by the presence of a psychoanalyst."[74]

Set in an enclosed garden, Tippett's work is designed to present the theatrical representation of the psychological link between an artificial landscape and the characters in the opera.[75] The first act is subtitled "confrontation" and in this act the audience is presented with a situation in which they see the various characters clash emotionally. On making his entrance, Faber, the civil engineer, immediately reveals the marital and sexual frustration that both he and his wife, Thea, are experiencing.

> How did we fall today
> Out of the mutual bed
> Apart?
> Today! Each day.
> The usual! Habitual!
> Till Thea withdraws into her garden.[76]

Faber and Thea's marital dilemma could be considered to be a result of their seemingly endless customary routines. The words "usual" and "habitual" strongly

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[71] See David Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphisics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 231-235.
[72] See Meirion Bowen, "A Tempest of Our Time" in *Opera Guide for The Operas of Michael Tippett*, ed. by Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1985) p. 93-98.
[73] See Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1991) p. 231-234.
[74] See Eric Walter White, *Tippett And His Operas* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1979) p. 94.
[75] See David Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics*, p. 28-32.
[76] *The Knot Garden*, Act I, scene v.

indicate that both characters are seriously dissatisfied with their ritualistic marriage. Their dysfunctional partnership could be read as being directly associated with their psychical imbalance, which leads Thea to retreat alone into the garden and gives rise to Faber's inexplicable (and unexamined) behaviour towards Flora. The sense of superimposition of symbolism in the opera also finds an example in the role of Mangus. As we finally discover, the role is designed to parallel the character of Prospero in *The Tempest*, but Tippett simply transposes Prospero's thematic function to Mangus without making any connection with the already sketchy plot. The function of Mangus is to observe the behaviour of the other characters; however his actual motivation is not at all clear and the audience is left wondering whether he has some sexual interest in Flora, Dove or Thea.

Thea's labyrinthine garden not only metaphorically indicates her emotional bewilderment but also provides her with a personal space where she believes she belongs and where she feels at ease.[77] To quote Meirion Bowen's observation, "the title of the opera provides it with a presiding metaphor: the knot-garden is an allusion to the formalized garden of French origin, popular in Elizabethan times, normally made of tiny box-hedges and low shrubs, and intended to relate the layout of the garden to the architecture it adjoined; on the other hand, it could be thought of as a maze, or as a rose-garden which 'changes with the inner situations'; in the central act, it is primarily a maze."[78] The failure of her marriage with Faber, has ultimately led Thea to find refuge within her garden, where she exhibits obvious obsessive behaviour.

> Only I may prune this garden.
> […]
> Pruning is the crown.
> […]
> Where I touch the tap-root
> To my inward sap.[79]

Thea's predisposition for gardening asks to be read as the character's emotional and psychological compensation for her stressful and unsatisfactory marital and sexual life. The physical sensation and emotional fulfilment, which Thea achieves through

[77] See Geraint Lewis, "Spring come to you at the farthest in the very end of Harvest" in *Michael Tippett: A Celebration*, ed. by Geraint Lewis, p. 199-201.
[78] Meirion Bowen, "A Tempest of Our Time" in *Opera Guide for The Operas of Michael Tippett*, ed. by Nicholas John, p. 93.

working in her garden, can be seen as a means to regenerate her libido. According to Carl Gustav Jung's study on psychic energy, "the progression of libido might therefore be said to consist in a continual satisfaction of the demands of environment conditions. This is possible only by means of an attitude, which as such is necessarily directed and therefore characterized by a certain one-sidedness."[80] As a result, Thea's garden can be interpreted as her disordered subconscious self and by constant "gardening" her psychological shadow can still be suppressed and kept under control, as a means of compensating for the sacrifice of her emotional needs.

Just as in the case of Thea, whose weakened ego has literally been channelled into her over attentive care of her garden, Faber finds solace through diverting his physical drive into the exploration of other forms of sexuality.

> I'm curious.
> I had to know
> You – Dov, what if I
> Want you: have power
> To tempt, to force? Come,
> I never kissed a man before.[81]

Faber's curiosity concerning homosexuality implies the character's long restrained sexual desire to experience these delights, which surface when he meets a hitherto unknown male guest and within seconds is inviting a kiss.[82] It would seem that when his own marriage is in jeopardy, Faber's ego can no longer bar the deluging homosexual drive, which has gradually emerged from the character's unconscious instinct and thus has made its way into his conscious actions. To quote Carl Jung's words, "closer examination of the dark characteristics- that is, the inferiorities constituting the shadow- reveals that they have an emotional nature, a kind of autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better, possessive quality. Emotion, incidentally is not an activity of the individual but something that happens to him. Affects occur usually where adaptation is weakest, and at the same time they reveal the reason for its weakness, namely a certain degree of inferiority and the existence of

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[79] The Knot Garden, Act I, scene ii.
[80] See Carl Gustav Jung, *Jung: Selected Writings* selected by Anthony Storr (London: Fontana Press, 1983) p. 59.
[81] *The Knot Garden*, Act II, scene v.
[82] See Peter Dennison, "Tippett and the New Romanticism" in *Michael Tippett: A Celebration*, ed. by Geraint Lewis, p. 178-180.

a lower level of personality."[83]

Like Faber and Thea, the other couple in the opera, namely, Mel and Dov are also confronting a crisis in their relationship.[84] Their estranged partnership can be highlighted by their reactions, which can be seen during the rehearsals for a performance of *The Tempest,* and the struggles between Ariel/Dov and Caliban/Mel have finally intertwined both theatrically and personally. To quote David Matthews' study: "Mel's and Dov's relationship is […] at breaking point, and their insecurity is evident from their appearance in fancy dress disguise as Caliban and Ariel, and their inability at first to speak except in caricature."[85] When the cast steps into role-playing *The Tempest*, this is clearly meant to signal that they are accessing the deeper tides of emotion evoked by mythic structure. Unfortunately, two of the characters, Denise and Thea, have no corresponding roles in *The Tempest* and so have to stand about like spare parts – whether or not that means they get to participate in the mythic-Jungian healing is not made clear – if they do, it is not clear why the laborious role-playing is at all necessary. Because of her possible role as a victim of male sexual aggression Flora should be sympathetic figure – but the uncertainty of touch means that she is not so much an innocent Miranda as a retarded wild-child.

In *The Knot Garden*, the composer faithfully engages with the revolutionary social themes of its epoch.[86] Each character in the opera is a symbolic representative of a fashionable social trend of the 1960's. However, the piece is not properly motivated or structured – we are in a wispy, inconsequential world loaded with "issues" with lots of "right-on" connotations, such as gay liberation, freedom-fighting and sexual liberation but because it is all so remote from reality, the issues remain abstract without there being any sense of actual engagement. The literary references, for example *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alls Well that Ends Well*, seem merely adventitious and promiscuous, – even a bit of *King Lear* is thrown in for no discernible purpose. It is sometimes remarked of Tippett that he seemed to think

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[83] Carl Gustav Jung, *Jung: Selected Writings* selected by Anthony Storr, p. 91.
[84] See Paul Driver, "The Knot Garden" in *Michael Tippett: A Celebration*, p. 155-160.
[85] See David Matthews, *Michael Tippett: An Introductory Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) p. 83.
[86] To quote Marwick's study, "practically all the activities, student protests, hippies, yippies, Situationists, advocates of psychedelic liberation, participants in be-ins and rock festivals, proponents of free love, members of the underground, and advocates of Black Power, women's liberation, and gay liberation believed that engaging in struggles, giving witness, or simply doing their own thing they were contributing to the final collapse of bad bourgeois society." Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 10.

almost exclusively in symbolic terms and that his corresponding connection with everyday reality was somewhat attenuated - although his perception of real people tended to be much shrewder and more concrete than this would imply.

The homosexual relationship in Tippett's *The Knot Garden,* interestingly discusses one of the unique social movements which emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970's, namely, gay liberation. To quote Arthur Marwick's study, "gay liberation shares one of the most salient characteristics of all the protest movements of the sixties: an insistence that is was genuinely revolutionary; and like other movements it encountered both violent repression from the police and a certain tolerance from those liberal upholders of humanist values and measured judgement whom I [Marwick] have identified as also being important actors in sixties developments."[87] Inspired by women's liberation, gay liberation not only embraces the full recognition of homosexuality but also emphasises the civil rights of this social minority. Furthermore, the homosexual union in the opera arguably mirrors the librettist/composer's own "turbulent" relationship with Karl Hawker which finally came to an end in 1974.[88] In *The Knot Garden*, Tippett has presented the unavoidable social trend for the general acceptance of homosexuality, by the placing of a homosexual couple as almost mirror images of a heterosexual pair.

Denise, like Mel and Dov, also characterises a new breed of social movement, namely, feminism.[89] The character's radical conduct is vividly captured in her "half majestic, half sinister" entrance.

> I want no pity.
> This distortion is my pride.
> I want no medal.
> The lust of violence has bred
> Contamination in my blood.

[87] Ibid, p. 725
[88] See Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues: An Autobiography*, p. 226-230.
[89] According to Marwick, "amid the tension, the exultation, the heightened sensitivities engendered in the turmoil of 1968-9, women participating in the great causes of the time became sharply conscious of their own subordinate position, of their own rights, and of the blatant withholding of them. Some women, in isolation, had harboured rebellious thoughts; now they were brought together in stimulating interaction, in a period when all authority systems, all power relationships, open or concealed, real or imagined, were subject to the most intensive scrutiny – aided by the new neo-Marxism theory, much more subtle and appealing than the vulgar Marxism which had had to serve the radical young right through from the interwar years till the end of the fifties." Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974*, p. 679.

I cannot forget […].[90]

The stanza reveals the character's ultimate reaction to women's repression in society. Although Denise's campaign for women's civil rights has resulted in her having a "twisted" and "disfigured" appearance; her sole aspiration is to win equal respect in the predominately patriarchal society. The fact that she detests others' sympathy for her can be regarded as her first step towards her ideal of sexual equality.

Even though, the composer enthusiastically embraces the social issues of the era and transports them into his work, the characterisation of each role show a tendency towards a cardboard symbol representing a specific issue rather than full human realisation. The music in the last scenes is clearly meant to be a summation and expression of the theme of reconciliation and emerging transformation. While this music is indeed splendid and likely to impress the audience in its own expressive terms, it also lacks argument and fails to correspond with the libretto at the narrative level. Although Mangus/Prospero insists that the play within the play is the effective agency of change, the spectators in fact do not really witness "the transformation" unfold before them. We only see various confrontations and interactions between assorted pairs of characters but Denise and Thea have to remain spectators because there is no proper role for them in the re-enactment of *The Tempest*. The cast-list of *The Tempest* is being used too literally and the pattern remains externally imposed; similarly Flora cannot properly fill the role of Miranda because she has no Ferdinand.

Yet it was this parallelism with *The* Tempest that formed the crucial structural and thematic inspirations which led to the creation of *The Knot Garden*. Tippett's opera, like the Shakespearean play, begins with a quasi-illusionary storm which leads the audience into a chaotic dramatic situation.[91] Furthermore, by actually mirroring *The Tempest*'s dramatic actions in the final act of the opera, Tippett pinpoints the solution for the relational anarchy in *The Knot Garden,* namely, the theme of forgiveness. In the essay, "A Tempest of Our Time", Bowen points out, "the characters behave consistently throughout the opera as though caught up in a maze. Tippett reinforces this point by introducing associated metaphors. The most important of these comes at the climax of act three where the characters reach a state

[90] *The Knot Garden*, Act I scene xiii.
[91] See Robert Tear, "[…] a Child of Earth and of Starry Heaven […]" in *Michael Tippett: A Celebration*, p. 14-15.

of tentative self-understanding and reconciliation.[92]" Faber and Thea's marital crisis eventually results in harmonious re-union as they synchronically chant their re-gained passion for each other, "our enmity's transcended in desire." The dramatic climax is that their marriage has finally been resuscitated as the curtain falls.[93]

The opera had a long and painful gestation: the material was constantly re-worked and re-written with large elements added and subtracted as the process went on – even involving the final elimination of a central character, Claire, almost at the last minute.[94] One can see why – the character was there from the beginning only to provide a symmetrical cast-list in which pairings all round would provide an image of general forgiveness and reconciliation. However, the symmetry and the generality of scheme turned out to be symptomatic of the problem that haunts the libretto throughout – that it is built upon an abstract thesis and not from the complexities of human events. Of course, the characters do interact in a certain fashion, but the lack of a genuine plot is indicative. Ominously, during the writing of the libretto, Tippett often speaks in his letters of Dadaism and surrealism as if sometimes they were governing principles and at others just technical fixes. The second feature that flows from this long period of writing is the over-loading of meaning evident throughout; indeed, so overloaded is it that it has become a kind of private echo-chamber of literary references and allusions - with a corresponding loss of external coherence and clarity. It is as if the composer has forgotten that his audience also has a part to play.

If Turnage's *Greek* shows the dangers of a thoughtless attempt at transplanting myth out of its vital context, *The Knot Garden* gives us the perils of using a do-it-yourself kit. Generalised symbols, images and motifs abound but the human element in the form of recognisable people never arrives. In the event the names are fatally indicative: Faber, Thea, Flora. It is like an early medieval *psychomachia* with characters named, Lust, Avarice and Patience looming out of the mist. Alas for patience, the result is not so much a bold piece of mythic invention as an incoherent bundle of random images and fashionable concerns. Doubtless there is a kind of courage involved in tackling these issues, such as racism, homophobia, and patriarchy. However, courage is not the same class of thing as artistic achievement,

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[92] Meirion Bowen, "A Tempest of Our Time" in The *Opera Guide for The Operas of Michael Tippett*, ed. by Nicholas John, p. 93.

[93] See Stephen Johnson, "The Knot Garden" in The programme for the Scottish Opera's production of the opera, 2005. p.20-23.

[94] See Michael Tippett, *Selected Letters of Michael Tippett*, ed. by Thomas Schuttenhelm (London:

and the reader starts nervously looking for oppressed Bushmen, threatened whales and suffering Vietnamese to further fill out the list of indicative figures. *The Knot Garden* has firmly presents its credentials as a Jungian psycho-drama. The characters' names rather give the clue – like the action, they too are flat-footed symbols, walking types without any real inner dimension or life. The Jungian dimension is reductive rather than enriching.

In *The Knot Garden* Tippett is pre-occupied with cramming every possible symbol into the opera as if complexity has been taken to mean the same as obscurity bordering on chaos. The problem seems to be the method of top-down writing: begin with the most abstract and generalised thesis imaginable, then see what bits of human nature can be fitted into the scheme. And "nature" here has a very general sense – not much obviously recognisable behaviour to be detected in the work, certainly not in the dialogue – which invites the wrong sort of laughter: "Where I touch the tap-root/ To my inward sap." The employment of psychoanalytic framework can only further confuse the audience. The practice of psychoanalysis begins with the real patient and then works back to a governing hypothesis, but in *The Knot Garden*, Tippett begins at the other end: abstractions and literary notions are the start and well-spring of the material and the humans are added later as exemplifications of the previously accepted ideas; they are not there as having value in themselves. Complexity is achieved by the manipulation and over-loading of the psychological concepts, not through the real difficulties of human experience. Denise has an entry aria of severe drama: in the cause of freedom, she has been tortured and crippled by unnamed sinister forces; at the end, without anything in particular having happened, she is skipping off with Mel. The motivation for this pairing has nothing to do with peoples' emotions or changes and everything to do with the pattern of reconciliation Tippett is determined to foist upon his characters.

The clunking third act is an extended re-enactment of *The Tempest* which appears to be used as a fleeting reference-point to add a richer dimension, but it turns out to be a rather plodding re-enactment whose main purpose is to display some kind of reconciliation or forgiveness. However, the composer does not give a specific grounding or motivation for this final pairing and reconciliation. The point in *The Tempest* is that the characters go through temptations, trials and suffering in the course

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Faber and Faber, 2005) p. 336-339.

of which they come to some kind of self-realisation. *The Knot Garden* merely gives us a sequence of inconsequential encounters without resonance, subtlety or engagement. In the final scene, Mangus just drifts off stage with the rest while Thea and Denise remain themselves because there is no corresponding role for them in *The Tempest*. Faber and Thea's "reconciliation" is just a token, having no basis in character or event. It is all done by "magic". One may make various criticisms of the libretto of *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, but the whole affair is held together by a consistent and forceful musical expression which imposes, at the very least, a dominant emotional framework. In *The Knot Garden*, on the other hand, the eclecticism that so undermines the coherence of the libretto is extended into the musical expression leaving the audience frequently at a loss as to how it should be reacting. This is not the frequent modernist problem where we lack the traditional assurance of conventional tonal associations; it is more that the nervous leaping from one style to another suggests that the composer is also unsure of his emotional register.

The Knot Garden not only provides an analytical study of human relationships in a postmodern idiom, it also offers a striking perspective of the union between words and music in an operatic creation. Tippett is the sole creator of the entire piece and therefore words and music are created as a conjoint entity. By studying the librettist/composer's third opera, a reader should have the opportunity to comprehend the method which Tippett employs to create a seamless union between words and music. As the composer/ librettist remarks, "the work of art where these antagonistic functions are successfully mediated – that is, where all the struggle has been discharged into the artistic experience and nothing is left over to our embarrassment – will constitute our ideal […] Meanwhile, it is probable that opera, whose contrived situations are fully expressed only when the music is played in the theatre, is a most natural medium for such art."[95] The lesson from a close reading of *The Knot Garden* seems to be that although myths may be vehicles for messages from the otherwise inscrutable gods, their point of contact and coherence is in the lives of recognisable human beings and these already tenuous presences are hardly made more concrete or involving by being attached to barely walking symbols.

[95] Michael Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius* (Herts: Paladin, 1974) p. 64.

IV. Love Alone Reigns

Je veux la jeunesse!
A moi les plaisirs,
Les jeunes maîtresses!
A moi leurs caresses!
A moi leurs desires!
A moi l'energie
Des instincts puissants,
Et la folle orgie
Du Coeur et des sens![96]

Faust, the great epic by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, has inspired a number of composers and librettists to attempt to achieve a worthy musical and dramatic adaptation. Originally, the great German poet had intended to ask the young Mozart, to translate his metaphysical text into a suitable musical opus.[97] Louis Spohr produced such a work in 1816 but it was the French composer Hector Berlioz who was the first to achieve a great and enduring version, albeit many years later, with his "légende dramatique", *La Damnation de Faust* (1846).[98] After the passing of some ten years, Charles Gounod, a compatriot of Berlioz, re-visited Goethe's text, in order to make use of it as the basis of his celebrated but controversial *grand opera*, *Faust,* which was premiered in 1859. In the first act of the operatic collaboration by Jules Barbier, Michel Carré and Gounod, the audience will find the ageing protagonist, Faust, desperately wanting to regain his youth in order to gratify his own sensual and physical desires. According to Peter Conrad's observation, "Gounod's hero has dispensed with the moody mental disquiet of his predecessor in Berlioz. His ambition is sexual adventure; he is operatic because orgiastic-'A moi les plaisirs des jeunes maîtresses!' he cries. […] Gounod's fiend, like romantic music, swamps the anxious

[96] *Faust*, Act I scene I by Jules Barbier, Michel Carré and Charles Gounod. English translation, "I want youth! / Then, pleasure will be mine, / So will young mistresses! / Mine their caress! / Mine their desires! / Mine their energy/ Of powerful instincts/ And the mad orgy/ Of the heart and senses!" by B. Vierne.
[97] See Dieter Borchmeyer, "Goethes Faust musikalisch betrachtet" in *Goethezeit Portal* (Frankfurt a. M. : Hrsg von Herman Jung, 2002) p. 87.

reason. Méphistophélès appears when Faust curses science, faith, and the patience of delayed gratification. At first he tempts his new client with the vulgar gains and glories of bourgeois man - gold, fame, power."[99] Having gained the assistance of Mephistopheles, Faust is able to achieve his wish to be rejuvenated and win the heart of an innocent girl, Marguerite. However, the hero has to sacrifice his eternal soul as the price of his pact with Satan. In Gounod's *Faust,* we find a nineteenth-century romanticised interpretation of a classic myth. The opera deals ambiguously with the temptation of such corruptive forces as power, money and sexual gratification. While Gounod's work celebrates the freedom that those corruptive forces can bestow on a person, it also provides a strong sense of Christian morality as a relief for such a satanic enterprise. Therefore, as Marguerite's soul ascends to heaven in the closing scene, Gounod and his librettists have re-enforced religious values in the minds of the audience in contrast with Marlowe's play where one is struck by the sheer pettiness and triviality of Faust's inner life almost as much as his absolute damnation.[100]

The employment of the Faustian legend can be considered as an essential theme in Auden and Kallman's first collaboration, *The Rake's Progress.* Although the Faustian legend had been dramatised through Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1604/1616),[101] it seems likely that Auden and Kallman's first libretto was more influenced by Goethe's epic and it immediately provides a mythic dimension to the entire narrative.[102] During the period of writing *The Rake's Progress*, Goethe's version of the Faustian legend had taken a prime position in the poet's inspiration. Auden reflects, "the story of Faust is precisely the story of a man who refuses to be anyone and only wishes to become someone else. Once he has summoned Mephistopheles, the manifestation of possibility, there is nothing left for

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[98] See Thierry Benardeau and Marcel Pineau, *L'Opéra* (St. Amand-Montrond: Nathan, 2000) p. 76-77.
[99] See Peter Conrad, *A song of Love and Death: The Meaning of Opera* (London: Hogarth Press, 1989) p. 58-59.
[100] See Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theatre in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Mary Whittall (London: Chicago University Press, 198) p. 177-181 and 402-404.
[101] According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, "Marlowe's Play exists in two very different forms: the A text (1604) and the much longer B text (1616), which according to theatrical records contains yet more scenes of other hands and that has also been revised to conform to the severe censorship statutes of 1616." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by M. H. Abrams and others, 2 vols (London: Norton & Company, 1993) I, p. 768.
[102] According to Carpenter's study, Auden's poem, 'A Thanksgiving', reveals the most influential figures throughout the English poet's career. The verse is "a catalogue of some of those who had influenced him so much over the years: Hardy, Yeats, Charles Williams, Kierkegaard, Horace, Goethe, and others." Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981) p. 448.

Faust to represent but the passive consciousness of possibility."[103] That this theme was already in his mind could be argued from the fact that the English poet's work, "New Year Letter" can be read as his own account of Faust.[104] But in contrast to Gounod, at the end of Stravinsky's opera, the cast sings a moral epilogue, albeit not in the scale of narrative the audience has just witnessed, highlighting the composer and the librettists' joint decision to include the *buffo* element of the da Ponte operas. By mocking the apparent seriousness of the issues raised in the main action in the epilogue, Stravinsky, Auden and Kallman intend to accommodate a modernist interpretation of a *buffo* myth in the opera. *Buffo* myth is a mythic and moral narrative with heavily anachronistic style and content which is refracted through a modern treatment to point back to the eighteenth-century and simultaneously away from it to the present day. The simple contrast in Hogarth between pastoral and urban with the pastoral scene remaining the locus of true value in the opera; health and sanity against the inherent corruptions and depravity of the city is not being contradicted but strongly modified by the presence of Mephistopheles who uses the city as an instrument of his schemes. However the portrayal of Tom from the beginning ("the old fool!") indicates that Tom would be easily corruptible anywhere and that the simplicities of urban wickedness are being altered and enlarged by the demonic presence of Shadow.

Unlike Faustus, Tom succumbs to Mephistopheles' temptation very easily and quickly. Auden and Kallman's portrayal of Tom at the beginning of the opera makes the audience believe the hero is a feeble and ordinary character. Although the protagonist is participating in a high moral drama throughout the entire opera, the character is incredibly weak and petulant which makes it difficult to take him seriously as a Faustian moral subject. However, the libretto operates on the assumption that Tom is interesting *because* he is such a feeble and ordinary creature. At the literal level, why would Mephistopheles bother with such an insignificant thing as Tom's soul? Faustus is a prize where as with the likes of Tom, Mephistopheles

[103] See W. H. Auden, *New Years Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941) p. 16.
[104] Pascoe reports, "the doomed Gretchen of Faust, Part I has no counterpart in Auden's *New Year Letter* but Elizabeth Mayer takes the place of the transfigured Gretchen of Faust, Part II. Like its model, the poem begins by renouncing old formulae, then ranges eclectically through distant epochs and conflicting ideas, searching, not for a place to rest, but for a labour that will issue in eternal and unending progress." See David Pascoe, "Auden's Addictions", unpublished talk, p. 5.

hardly needs to try. But if one takes a Christian perspective, every immortal soul is priceless even such a poor thing as Tom's.

From the time of his arrival in America in 1939, Stravinsky had shown a marked enthusiasm for embarking on writing an opera in English. To quote Roger Savage's study, "the composer had for some time wanted to make an English-speaking opera as he now lived in the English- speaking world; and having pitched on the subject out of Hogarth, he had been on the look-out for a wordsmith; a purveyor of good English syllables and rhythms."[105] After taking the recommendation of his Californian neighbour and friend, Aldous Huxley, Stravinsky invited the English poet to collaborate on his project. Although by the time of writing *The Rake's Progress,* both the composer and Auden had taken American citizenship, the inspiration of the piece is mainly derived from their European background.[106]

In order to understand the viewpoint behind Stravinsky, Auden and Kallman's *The Rake's Progress*, it is crucial to identify the genre of the opera. In Hogarth's work we are given a detailed portrayal of a naïve lad who has just inherited a sum of money but is eventually corrupted by the cosmopolitan life style. The various tableaux show the temptations and progress of his degradation. Carefully, the composer and the librettists retain the structure of the story-line from Hogarth's original set of engravings which depict a moral fable about the manifold dangers of city life. But the opera adds two further elements to the story, namely the person of Nick Shadow and the motif of the three wishes. These additions provide a more mythic resonance to Tom Rakewell's eventual downfall. The use of three wishes comes from fairy-tale narratives which illustrate the theme that wishing is dangerous especially if the person gets what he/she wished for and that the mechanisms of fulfilment are not to be trusted; the former (at least proximately) is from Marlowe/Goethe's *Faust*. This push towards a more mythic reading suggests that large forces of destiny, good and evil are being invoked here and the implication inevitably follows that Tom has become in some way representative. Unlike Dr Faustus, however, Tom does not know he has a pact with the devil; he has only indulged in foolish wishes; he is also unlike the Tom of Hogarth who has simply and legitimately inherited a miser's wealth, which he proceeds to squander without any prompting from an equivalent of Nick Shadow –

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[105] See Roger Savage, "Making a Libretto: Three Collaboration over 'The Rake's Progress'", *Opera Guide: Oedipus Rex/ The Rake's Progress* ed. Nicholas John (London: John Calder, 1991) p. 45.

[106] See W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, *Libretti: And Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden*, ed.

unless White's Club is to be thought of in this light. Some of the prompting for these more expansive motifs came from Stravinsky who seem to have fastened on the image of the fiddle in several of the pictures (most notably the last in the madhouse) and associated it with the fiddle in *The Soldier's Tale* – perhaps also with the dangerous fiddle in Krenek's *Jonny Spielt auf*.

Faithful to Hogarth's original paintings, Stravinsky, Auden and Kallman's *The Rake's Progress* is set in eighteenth century England. The structure of the opera follows Hogarth's second major graphic series,[107] *A Rake's Progress* (1735) from which the painter's eight descriptive tableaux have been successfully transformed into a three act music drama, with nine individual scenes.[108] However, in order to convert Hogarth's celebrated paintings into operatic format, the librettist had unavoidably modified the original source.

Auden notes, "in composing our libretto, Mr. Kallman and I have retained the essential elements of Hogarth's version, such as the unforeseen inheritance, the squandering of it, the marriage to an ugly old woman, the auction of the hero's property, and his end in Bedlam. Then we have added three other familiar myths; 1) the story of Mephistopheles – the protagonist Tom Rakewell engages a servant called Shadow; 2) a card game with the Devil which the Devil loses through overconfidence in himself; 3) the myth of three wishes – in the opera Rakewell's first wish is to be rich, his second wish is to be happy, and his third wish is to be good."[109] Whereas mythic narratives have a strong desire to be authoritative and make claims about truth-telling, moral fables tend not to make such a claim. They are overtly fictive: the situations described are often ludicrous, implausible or grotesque; and the morals themselves are either so generalised as to be hardly useful, or are playful or misleading. Hogarth's original is very much in the fable tradition and Auden and Kallman add a mythic dimension into the *buffo* narrative through the creation of Nick

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by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) p. xx-xxi.

[107] William Hogarth's first graphic series is *A Harlot's Progress* (1732).

[108] The eight tableaux of Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* are as follows, *The Heir*, *The Levée*, *The Orgy*, *The Arrest*, *The Marriage*, *The Gaming House*, *The Prison* and *The Madhouse*.

[109] The English poet continues, "These three wishes are related to the three temptations, and so, respectively, to the wish for pleasure, the wish for absolute spiritual freedom through some gratuitous act, and the wish to become the saviour of the world. The first of these wishes naturally leads him into a brothel; as for the other two, I do not want to give away any secrets that I would like to be a surprise, but I will say only that the second temptation leads him into marriage with a woman called Baba the Turk; and the third makes him preoccupied with a curious machine." W. H. Auden, "How the Libretto of The Opera 'The Rake's Progress' Was Born" in *Libretti: And Other Dramatic Writings* by W. H. Auden, ed. Edward Mendelson, p. 609-610.

Shadow.[110]

The use of a satanic figure in the opera adds a level of seriousness and weight to the narrative. Hogarth's pictures are wonderful and fascinating; they present us with misfortune and folly – but their moral lessons are banal. Add in Nick Shadow, on the other hand, and the situation becomes more potent. One of our deep fears in that there might be in the world, an active principle of evil, something more than the mere absence of good. This does not really depend upon any theological commitments that Auden might have had: as with all aestheticised myths we do not have to believe in any literal truths regarding, for example, the supernatural in general or the Devil in particular. What we are being directed to consider is something more weighty than mere social ruin or feeble remarks like "A fool and his money are soon parted."

The protagonist, Tom Rakewell, a young countryman, is in love with Anne Trulove and intends to ask for her hand in marriage. The librettists portray a seemingly peaceful and joyous pastoral atmosphere in the first scene, in which the lovers are indulging themselves in the ecstasy of deep affection and in the warmth of the environment. In the opening duet the couple exchange vows of their love:

> Love tells no lies
> And in love's eyes
> We see our future state,
> Ever happy, ever fair:
> Sorrow, hate,
> Disdain, despair,
> Rule not there
> But love alone
> Reigns o'er his own.[111]

The word "love" unquestionably is the centre of the verse and the passage is strictly attached to the theme - as it is "love" that eventually saves Tom from damnation. Furthermore, Tom and Anne's ardent love not only enables them to enjoy the present carefree moment but also empowers the two characters to "see" their future state. Echoing a marital vow, Tom and Anne are willing to share their future together. Moreover, they are ungrudgingly to ignore "sorrow", "hate" "disdain" and "despair"

[110] Roger Savage, "Making a Libretto: Three Collaboration over 'The Rake's Progress'", *Opera Guide: Oedipus Rex/ The Rake's Progress* ed. Nicholas John, p. 52-53.
[111] *The Rake's Progress*, Act I scene i.

any of which might occur and be content in their everlasting love. Of course, in the event, this passage is deeply ironic as "sorrow", "hate" and "despair" is exactly what they are about to experience throughout the story.

Tom Rakewell's ignorance, pettiness and over estimation of his own luck could be regarded as the main factors which will contribute to his ultimate downfall. Rakewell's first aria demonstrates the protagonist's youthful but unrealistic enthusiasm.

> Till I die, then, of fever,
> Or by lighting am struck,
> Let me live by my wits
> And trust to my luck.
> My life lies before me,
> The world is so wide:
> Come, wishes, be horses;
> This beggar shall ride.[112]

Tom is too optimistic about his fortune and thinks good luck will automatically comes his way. The desire to have an affluent life sprang initially from the wish to earn the respect of the Trulove family in order to marry Anne. However, as Tom continues to attempt to achieve ultimate success, his original ambition gradually becomes subservient to his lust for sensuous pleasures and his craving for an easy life. Tom's downfall, is due firstly to the weakness of his character, secondly to a materialist society and thirdly perhaps to the intervention of a supernatural entity. The librettists juxtapose the ironic use of the proverb "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride" with "I wish I had money" and Nick immediately enters into the scene. Nick Shadow's entrance echoes the equivalent scene from Goethe's *Faust* when the hero parodies the Gospel of St John with "In the beginning was the deed" at which point large black dog enters the room. Mephistopheles has arrived

In contrast to Tom, the character of Anne Trulove possesses the quality of some of the Wagnerian female character who through their determination, help to gain the ultimate salvation of the opera's hero. Dramatically speaking, Anne's character in the opera is therefore in line with such Wagnerian heroines as, Senta and Elizabeth. Through the creation of Anne Trulove, both librettists have revealed their great

[112] *The Rake's Progress*, act I scene i.

interest in and admiration for the Wagnerian music dramas.[113] According to Auden, "nowhere else in the history of art (his [Wagner's] greatest rival is Proust) is the contrast so striking between the helplessness of the characters and the amazing will power, the capacity for self-help, the mendicant charm, of their creator […] In the expression of suffering […] Wagner is perhaps the greatest genius who ever lived."[114] Throughout the German master's most celebrated works, female characters are designed to possess a huge degree of heroic charisma into order to assist their heroes to accomplish their destined quest.[115] In Wagner's early work *Tannhäuser* (1845), for example, it is through the heroine's firm religious beliefs that the condemned hero is finally redeemed.

Although Anne, in distinction from Hogarth, is portrayed as a gentlewoman, her heroic and charismatic independence remain, arguably, the key to Tom Rakewell's ultimate spiritual salvation. In the creation of Anne Trulove the librettists have maintained the admirable constancy of Sarah Young, the seduced girl, in Hogarth's original. In that version, Sarah frames the whole story. Her weeping figure on the left of the first painting is the first we see, and the same figure, with her handkerchief to her eyes, is also the last, as she kneels beside Tom's collapsed body on the right of the final picture. At the beginning, she weeps for herself whereas at the end she weeps for him.[116] In the Hogarth, Tom, a student at Oxford, has seduced a peasant girl and made her pregnant but rejects her in his move to London. In the opera on the other hand, the librettists have raised her status to remove any question of opportunism. Even though she is not rich, her disinterested devotion mitigates the wickedness of Tom's character and suggests that the protagonist's wrong doings are not all due to the corruption of his character. In the final scene of the opera, Anne's figure not only echoes the presence of Sarah in Hogarth's original but also functions as the hero's final redeemer, releasing him from his failed quest. In Auden and Kallman's libretto, Anne is a true dramatic heroine.

Throughout the opera, Anne's presence and existence can be felt as a reminder of commitment and sanity to balance against the protagonist's gradual loss of reason

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[113] According to Humphrey Carpenter's study, "he [Auden] … told another friend: 'I've become a Wagner fan'; and he was soon writing an article describing Wagner as 'the greatest and most typical modern artist'." Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, p. 262.
[114] W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter*, p. 144-145.
[115] See Richard Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama: A Selection from Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by H. Ashton Ellis, ed. by Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn, p. 136-141.
[116] See Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth: A Life And A World*, p. 246.

during the course of his adventures in London. Anne's devotion and determination to rescue Tom Rakewell's deteriorating soul is clearly shown in her final aria in act one:

I go, I go to him.
Love cannot falter,
Cannot desert;
Though it be shunned
Or be forgotten,
Tough it be hurt,
If love be love
It will not alter.
O should I see
My love in need,
It shall not matter,
What he may be.[117]

The verse demonstrates Anne's determination to search for Tom. Her motivation derives not only from her love but also from her vows of fidelity. The aria is divided into two sections. Although the heroine opens the aria with a direct and inspiring sentence, the initial section of the stanza in fact reveals Anne's deepest fears and worries. Thus, the librettists' employment of words such as, "falter", "desert", "forgotten" and "hurt" subtly depict the heroine's ultimate fears and her isolation and horror. However, halfway through the verse in an expression of her belief in the power of love, the tone changes sharply from one of psychological turmoil into a forceful optimism.

A striking modernist element in the opera can be found in the librettists' treatment of Baba the Turk. In Hogarth's works, the corresponding character is one-eyed old maid whom Tom marries for her money. Tom is in a condition of financial embarrassment: he has been seized by the bailiffs for debts which can only be covered by marrying a rich woman. In Auden and Kallman's adaptation, on the other hand, the financial difficulties arrive after the marriage with Baba. The ironic twist in the opera in term of characterisation is that Baba eventually turns out to be one of the few morally autonomous and generous characters, even though she is initially perceived to be imperious and difficult.

BABA

[117] *The Rake's Progress*, act I scene iii.

You love him, seek to set him right:
He's but a shuttle-headed lad:
Not quite a gentleman, not quite
Completely vanquished by the bad:
Who knows what care and love might do?
But good or bad, I know he still loves you.[118]

The passage reflects the generous side of Baba's character. Under her demanding demeanour, the character's kind advice to Anne finally reveals a hidden kindness and moral clarity. Baba's encouragement enables Anne not only to strengthen her love for Tom but also inspires her determination to rescue her lover from his impending fate.

The reason for the change is interesting. In the Hogarth, Tom marries his old maid because she is rich and he is terribly in debt: the act is contemptible but has some degree of rationality behind it. In the opera, the marriage to Baba is an *acte gratuit* – there is no reason for it at all. He does it for the sole reason that he can. Unlike his other vices of lust and avarice, which are at least understandably human and may involve some pleasure or gain, this is done for no reason. At this moment Tom's behaviour goes beyond contemptible – it is wicked because it is a perversion of free-will. Divorced from any possible principle or motive it becomes Satanic and it is no accident that the plan is entirely Nick's idea.

SHADOW
Come, master, observe the host of mankind. How are they? Wretched. Why? Because they are not free. Why? Because the giddy multitude are driven by the unpredictable Must of their pleasures and the sober few are bound by the inflexible Ought of their duties. Would you be happy? Then learn to act freely.[119]

Shadow presents a caricature of two important moral theories in a dichotomy that is supposed to exhaustive: hedonism on the one hand and the Kantian Categorical imperative on the other. In 1948, such philosophical debate was a very up-to-date topic; to feature it in the opera chiefly represents Auden' horror at what he took to be the startling moral vacuity of Jean-Paul Sartre's ethical theory, in which one can best demonstrate real freedom by performing acts with no moral bearing at all. By marrying Baba, whom Tom does not particularly care for, the protagonist is enacting

[118] See *The Rake's Progress*, act III scene i.
[119] See Ibid, act II scene i.

his absolute freedom. And this kind of freedom, according to the librettists, has become indistinguishable from whim and is just as pointless.

Towards the end of the opera, in the graveyard, Tom gambles with Mephistopheles in a scene that not only evokes fairy-tale motifs suggestive of the mythic elements of the tale but also enters into more profound issues of corruption and redemption. In place of Hogarth's hapless gambling denizen of White's, Auden and Kallman present a more terrible game between Nick and Tom. It is, of course, for his soul. Although Rakewell's mind has been polluted with urban desires, the hero still possesses the original naivety of his character and at the height of his danger, Tom begins to recall the true love of his life, Anne, who has always been his guardian angel throughout his "quest":

> ANNE
> A love
> That is sworn before Thee can plunder
> Hell of its prey.
> RAKEWELL
> I wish for nothing else.
> Love, first and last, assume eternal reign;
> Renew my life, O Queen of Hearts, again.[120]

Nick Shadow finally reveals his satanic nature and prepares to consume Rakewell as his long awaited "prey". However, with Anne Trulove's plea for divine assistance, the lost hero can be saved from Old Nick's eternal damnation.[121] Love has finally achieved some kind of triumph: it has transcended individual passion and weakness; it may not save Tom from ruin or madness, but it can offer some alternative to nihilism. It is the opera's blend of moral fable and mythic resonance that makes the narrative so effective: moral satire asks us to detach ourselves from the plot and laugh, it is a distancing manoeuvre; myth invites us to connect with the story and commands our sympathies.

The reason for the use of a jaunty and light musical style in *The Rake's Progress* is partly to ironise the Hogarthian theme but its stylistic ambiguities also to serve as a medium to direct the plot into a more serious mode. The graveyard scene is a perfect example of such a musical illustration. Furthermore, the composer does not

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120 *The Rake's Progress*, Act III, scene ii.

121 Roger Savage, "Making a Libretto: Three Collaboration over 'The Rake's Progress'", *Opera Guide: Oedipus Rex/ The Rake's Progress* ed. Nicholas John, p. 52.

strictly follow the suggestions of the text. The libretto of *The Rake's Progress* is based on an eighteenth-century opera scheme which requires the alternation between recitative and aria. But during the composition of *The Rake* Stravinsky was studying Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, and this resulted in a considerable increase in ensemble setting. In Stravinsky's music, the composer softens the dichotomy between these two rigid formats of eighteenth-century opera and shows a desire to move towards *arioso* rather than simple recitative. Furthermore, the composer sometimes ignores the distinction between verse and prose, especially as a bridge towards ensemble. In this way, Stravinsky is able to give the music a more rapid, flexible atmosphere and move away from the static manner of composition which is found in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, the work that Hogarth would have known. In *The Rake's Progress*, although the audience seems to be presented with an eighteenth-century pastiche numbers opera which just happened to be composed in the twentieth-century, in fact they get nothing of the sort.

CONCLUSION

Throughout its four hundred years development, the genre of music theatre has not only reflected its contemporary aesthetic movements but also responded to the ongoing secularisation in Western society. When people cease to believe in the canonised religion, mythic narrative provides a sense of authority to fulfil our need when searching for the truth. The authority of these narratives initially lay largely in their divine connections – just as a king was considered to be a true king because he was believed to be descended from a god. Certainly, the Church Fathers clearly regarded the theory of euhemerisation as a potent weapon in the process of disenchanting classical myth.

Yet, within and after Renaissance theatre and opera, we find the same classical stories being re-told with the assumption that they still have some sort of authority even though the belief in the gods and the supporting theological matrix has gone and the stories have been secularised. What now is the source of the authority? One answer is that they simply come from ancient authors and that alone carries some sort of guarantee (old is good, history is a record of degeneration). A different sort of answer would be found in the observation that there has been a shift in attention away from the content of the narrative and onto the kind of story being told and that for example, there is increased emphasis on the elemental or extreme and that it is itself a source of power and hence with the authority of authenticity. And these elemental stories, because of their basic qualities may further be thought to convey fundamental truths about the configurations of human nature – these may not be messages from the gods, but the creative genius looks deeper into the structure and meaning of what we are.

A couple of things can happen when belief fails; one is that the myth is allegorised by being mapped into the current belief-system. Thus Hercules becomes a type or symbol of Christ. Or, more decisively, the myth becomes totally secularised and begins to serve quite different purposes. Chief of these is that the myth becomes an aesthetic object in its own right, that is, that aesthetic values have their own autonomous standing separate from that of morality and religion. But this autonomy can go further and in the course of the Enlightenment and thereafter, the role of

aestheticism is seen to begin to challenge the realm of religion itself. The poet or artist becomes the new source of mythic truth, sometimes by deliberate borrowing from "primitive" sources: folk stories and lyrics, untouched landscapes, strange foreign sculptures. This borrowing places both artist and audience back in touch with with authenticating essences, new fetishes for over-sophisticated urban man.

Twentieth-century music theatre reflects the growth of the sense of alienation and suspicion towards the social structure of the epoch. *Wozzeck*, for example, becomes the quintessential twentieth-century opera despite its origin in the mid-nineteenth-century precisely because the subject of the piece mirrors sense of anxiety felt by people and their distrust towards authority - the music in particular provides just the right blend of melodic reference and structural alienation to provide a focus for the audience's fears and uncertainties. With the collapse of certainty in the conventional social system and the fading influence of religion, people in the twentieth-century began to lose their confidence in stable artistic expression. In terms of operatic creation, librettists lost the artistic assurance of the conventional aria/recitative format for their works; composers suffered from disorientation in finding an exemplary musical expression for the era, which often found expression in the use of a musical eclecticism. Certainly it has given rise to an immense variety of styles and forms. This creative confusion might be the reason that of the seventeen operas featured in this thesis, only two, *The Rake's Progress* and *Peter Grimes* have formally broken into the standard repertoire. Perhaps the confusion and disorientation in operatic development throughout the twentieth-century will provide enough experimental examples for future librettists and composers, to pave the way for a convincing method for the amalgamation of words and music for twenty-first century artists.

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